





# Ruthie

RUTHIE was lucky. Her home was beautiful, her husband, Roy, steady, reliable and easy-going, her three children healthy, a handful but on the whole manageable. Her mother, a willing baby-sitter at any time, lived just around the corner, and her father was always ready to put his hand in his pocket to help her finances.

'You're the sort of person that lives happily ever after,' someone once told her during the war when Roy was overseas and she, together with thousands of other young wives, wondered whether she would ever see her husband again. And when Roy came home and they had picked up the threads of normal living, everything seemed to verify that story-book description of her. Except for occasional spells of *ennui* when the round of household chores became burdensome, she felt she could with every justification count herself among the luckiest of women.

Then all at once everything changed. Suddenly she was jerked out of the comfortable, secure little rut she had grown used to and in one nightmarish week in Chicago all her rosy visions of herself and her marriage were dispelled. There, in a series of unnerving experiences, she was confronted with facts so shattering in their impact that she found herself reviewing all her former values and judgments concerning love, happiness and, above all, her own relationship with her husband in the light of a crisis that threatened to undermine not only her marriage but her whole existence.





# *Ruthie*

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**T**HE REAL REASON I wanted to go to Chicago with my husband, Roy, on his last business trip was simply this: I was sick of the staleness of my life, and I thought the trip might do me good, might snap me out of a mood that can only be described as a kind of day-after-day-after-day feeling. I wanted to see Ethelyn, too, of course, and to try to find out more about Mary Louise's death. But in view of what happened to me, it's important to know the real reason I wanted to make that trip; it's important not to confuse reasons with excuses.

I know from talking to my friends and from reading magazine stories that this day-after-day-after-day feeling is a common enough one among housewives; it might almost be called an occupational disease. You get up in the morning to an assortment of raucous cereal boxes, and you get the children

(with all their library books and special twenty-five-cent fees for this or that) off to school. And your husband, showered and shaved and smelling of ironed shirts, eager for his own day, already detached from the household, leaves for work. Then you wash and you iron; you wipe fingerprints off mirrors and you make Jello; you empty the garbage and put bicycles in the garage; you look for missing mittens, take clothes to the cleaner's and stop at the post office for stamps. And so what? So what? None of it touches you. You feel nothing. And even when they all come home again and you have made the gravy and are taking your place, at last, at the dinner table, it still doesn't touch you. It should. You look about you at their faces, at the table, at the room. Their faces are beautiful; there is good food on the table; the room is pleasant and warm, and outside the sleet beats against the windows. You're lucky, very very lucky. But still it doesn't touch you: your heart, for some reason, is full of novacaine. And after dinner, after the children are in bed, there is nothing not a thing, you want to do. Reading, movies, television, friends, games, sewing? No. And when your husband at last says, "What's the matter?" you say, "Nothing." So you go to bed, being careful not to touch him (except for the ritual good-night kiss), and you turn your backs to each other. He goes to sleep. But you don't go to sleep because there's nowhere to put your arms and your pillow is all wrong and the street light shines through a crack in the curtain. Finally, you do go to sleep. What then? Why, suddenly it's morning again, and you must begin all over.

These moods are very common, I know, at the end of the winter. But it was not the end of winter when I decided to go to Chicago with Roy. It was the beginning of winter—November. And it seemed to me that during the past several years these moods had become more frequent, lasted longer. This past year the numbness had been on me all during January, February and March. It had returned in August and had lasted until the first cool mornings toward the middle of September.

And then it had returned again, at the end of October, with those first sparse snow flurries.

In Minnesota, there is nothing more ominous, more panic-inspiring, than those first snow flurries. The grass is brown; the leaves are gone; the birds are gone; it's still, very still outdoors; then suddenly you notice it's snowing a little. Not enough to show on the ground. Not enough to do anything except make you realize that May is a very long way off. It snows a little, then it stops. Damp; still again. Maybe you get three or four days of this before the real snow comes, the snow that stays on the ground and brings the numbness to your spirit

The snow was already on the ground and the numbness already in my spirit on the Tuesday after Thanksgiving, a grey, cold, windless day. I was returning from the supermarket just as the noon whistles began to blow. I had parked the car in the carpark and was staggering through the kitchen door with two large sacks of groceries. A big tin of something or other had punctured one of the sacks. I noticed that in my absence the cat had knocked a half-finished bowl of Corn Flakes to the kitchen floor. I had to go to the bathroom. And the telephone was ringing. I dumped the groceries on top of the dryer and hurried into the hall to answer it.

"Ruthie? Where in the world have you been all morning?"  
It was Mother.

"At the store. Why?"

"Well, I was trying to get you. You mean you were doing your marketing?"

"Yes. Thanksgiving threw me off this week. I think I'll go on Tuesday anyhow after this. It isn't as crowded as Friday."

"Did you go to the Centre?"

"I always do."

"Did you pass Miner's window? There's a suit in there that would be perfect for you. It's blue. Did you notice it?"

"No. I parked at the other end. I had to go to the dime store."

"More junk for the kids? Ruthie, that's where your money goes, you know."

"No. Towel bars."

"Well, anyhow, you go down and look at the suit this afternoon. I think it would be just perfect for you. The blue would be so good. Try it on. If you like it, I'll get it for you."

"I don't really need a suit, Mama. . . . Look, I just walked in the door and I've got to go to the john. Can I call you back?"

"No. I'm just waiting for a cab. Dad took the cab this morning, and I'm not going to take the streetcar on a day like this. I'm going out for lunch. Anyhow, did Auntie Helen get hold of you yet?"

"No. I didn't know she was back yet."

"Of course you did. I told you she was coming back yesterday. She got in yesterday afternoon. She and Joe came over after supper last night. They had some adorable pictures of Lucy's baby. He looks a little like your Teddy at that age, I thought. She didn't. She thought he was more like his father."

"Well, what did she want to get hold of me for?"

"I almost hate to tell you, dear. Honestly, I was shocked. She just stumbled, quite by accident, on Mary Louise Winterhalter's obituary in a Boston paper."

"Obituary?"

"Yes. She died last Friday, I guess. It was the queerest thing. Auntie Helen just picked up this paper on the train coming home. And you know her: she's a great obituary reader, even if she hasn't the faintest chance of finding anyone she knows in that section. Well, she just stumbled on Mary Louise. And the name sounded familiar to her. I guess she even met her once. We were trying to remember. She's sure she met Ethelyn. Anyhow, the age checked. So she cut out the notice and brought it along last night and said isn't that one of the girls

Ruthie lived at the lake with that summer. And of course it was."

"Well, but Mother! What did she die of?"

"It didn't say. It was just one of those short notices. They usually don't say, anyhow, if you'll notice. It's usually just 'after a long illness' or something like that. But this didn't say a thing."

"I can hardly believe it! She's exactly my age! She was thirty-nine in September."

"I know. Well, this is the first for you. I know the first among your own friends is always a shock."

"But thirty-nine! Good Lord! What do you suppose it was? A traffic accident or something?"

"You're just like your father. That's what he thought it was right away. But there would have been a further write-up, I thought. No. Was she pregnant, do you know?"

"I haven't heard from her since last Christmas. Isn't that awful? It makes me feel awful to realize that I haven't written and she hasn't written since last Christmas."

"It is awful. I have a suspicion, though, it was something female. That's usually the case at that age."

"But people don't die in childbirth any more."

"I said 'female,' dear. That covers a lot of ground. Ruthie, the cab is here. Hold on just a minute."

I could hear her voice calling faintly, "Cab! Oh cab! I'll be out in a moment." Then back to the phone: "Listen, honey, go get that suit at Miner's this afternoon. Charge it to me. Tell them it's on approval. Then bring it over and show it to me tonight. I think it would be just perfect for you."

"I will if I have time."

"Do it now. Make time. And Ruthie, don't brood about Mary Louise all day. We'll finish talking about it tonight. I've got to run now."

I hung up the phone, went to the bathroom, finished un-

loading the car, cleared up the breakfast debris from the kitchen—all in a kind of daze.

I kept wondering why in the world I should be so upset, so trembling almost, at the news of Mary Louise's death. It wasn't as if her death had left a hole in my life, a hollow in which her imagined footsteps or voice could echo. It had been five years since I had seen her, almost one year since I had written to her or she had written to me. When it came right down to it, it was the same with Ethelyn and me. Ethelyn Elwood, Mary Louise and I had spent the last summer of World War II together, living in a cottage at Lake Minnehaha. We'd known each other, all three of us, since our college days. We had been as intimate as sisters. But now, in a few short years, that intimacy had dwindled to an annual note on a Christmas card. It's funny after you're married the way most friendships, in order to survive time and space, have to be quadrangle affairs. I never cared for Don, Mary Louise's husband, and I'm sure his dislike of everything about St. Paul (Mary Louise's family, friends, everything in her past, for that matter) included me. Roy barely knew Don; and he thought Mary Louise was flighty, shallow, too little-girlish for his tastes. As for Ethelyn: Phil Nash, her first husband, was killed in 1945; she didn't marry Clarence Campbell until 1950; and a single woman is hard to fit into the life of any married couple.

So there was no reason, really, for me to be so upset, yet I was terribly upset. It was as if this were my first encounter with death. Perhaps it was. The first time, that is, the idea of death, the meaning and implications of death, had penetrated my consciousness. All your life, I guess, from your first death (a kitten, perhaps, or a baby bird fallen from its nest) to your last death (your own, of course), you keep trying to avoid this knowledge, postpone the understanding. As a child, I can remember thinking, If my mother and father should die, I shall simply get the paring knife in the kitchen and unbutton my belly button with its sharp point. This seemed a simple enough

solution to the most awful eventuality I could imagine at that time. But when I was fourteen and encountered my first human death, my grandmother's death, the ease and simplicity of this solution vanished completely. I remember being fascinated by the corpse of my grandmother: beige-coloured, falsely dressed up, objectified, and with a stillness more absolute than I had ever seen in any object, animate or inanimate. I remember wanting to stay in the room with the coffin for a long time, until the significance of a human corpse could sink into my mind. But people kept finding other, more wholesome, occupations for me: arranging trays of cake, or receiving casseroles of scalloped potatoes and spaghetti at the back door. And in the end, my grandmother was lowered into her grave without my ever comprehending her death. I'll think about it tonight, I thought. But I didn't. I fell asleep instead, and the only thing I learned from her death was that unbuttoning my belly button was not the easy solution I had always assumed it to be.

From that time until Mother told me about Mary Louise I had evidently been immune to the idea of death. Oh, there had been other deaths in my life, certainly, but they had been only facts—sad facts, yes, but still *only* facts. Classmates killed during World War II, old friends of my parents, an English teacher I had liked very much, a woman I had played bridge with several times who died as the result of a cerebral hemorrhage. I suppose any one of those deaths could have precipitated the anguish I felt at the news about Mary Louise, but evidently I was still engaged in the postponement of understanding when they occurred. For certain kinds of understanding there is no substitute for time, for ripeness.

In a peculiar way, however, I was enjoying my anguish over Mary Louise's death. Without ever saying it out loud to myself, I could tell that the news about her had pierced my numbness, and I was almost enjoying my melancholy. I was



feeling again! I was mourning, mourning actively, not so much for Mary Louise as for myself.

How had I lost touch these last years with everything that had once meant a great deal to me? Did I read good books any more the way I once had? Did I really feel the changing seasons any more? (Nowadays, tulips had to be in bloom before I even noticed they were out of the ground, and I could no longer smell Christmas trees.) And what had become of Roy? He had become "my husband." My husband will call for it on his way home. My husband refinished our coffee table. And friends, friends—where were all my friends? All the people I really cared for? Vanished, into a wispy, misty kind of <sup>the</sup> past. Replaced by new friends who were no friends at all—just neighbours, nice people, wives, fellow members of this or that. Must one wait for time to put a patina on people too? Mary Louise and Ethelyn I still regarded as my best friends, my real friends. And now Mary Louise was dead.

And there was no one—absolutely no one—in St. Paul with whom I could discuss her death. No friends. No one to help me link the past with the present. Mary Louise's parents had died, one in 1949 and the other in 1954. (The last time I saw Mary Louise, in fact, was when she was home for her father's funeral in 1954.)

Mary Louise was the youngest child in a family of five. There was a ten-year age difference between her and her next older sister. Her father had been a Methodist clergyman, and the Winterhalters had lived in half a dozen or more towns in Minnesota before he retired and settled in St. Paul. By the time the Winterhalters moved to St. Paul (during Mary Louise's senior year at the University of Minnesota), all of the other Winterhalter children had already left home. I had met one brother several times during our college days, and one sister once during the war; the other two I knew only by name and reputation. I gather they had all pretty much broken with their parents for one reason or another. As Mary Louise said

one time, half jokingly, "My brothers and sisters all prefer cigarettes to our parents. I swear that's why Meg never comes home—because she couldn't get through a week without smoking."

No. There was no one in town who might know more about Mary Louise's death than I did, no one to whom the death would be anything more than one of those fact deaths, like the woman I used to play bridge with. I thought of calling Don in Boston. But the more I thought of it, the more convinced I became that a note would be not only more appropriate but also more satisfactory. Imagine talking long distance to the bereaved husband of an old friend—an old friend you hadn't cared enough about to do anything more than send Christmas cards to. And the bereaved husband not liking you. And you not liking the bereaved husband. No . . .

By three-thirty I had made the beds, washed the dishes and put away the groceries—nothing more. And now Teddy and Linda and Barbara began to straggle in from school, clanking lunch boxes, opening the refrigerator, climbing up on counters to reach cookies in high cupboards, calling friends on the telephone, cluttering the living room with sweaters and jackets and mittens, crayon drawings and spelling cards, banging doors, drawers, recounting the day's trials and joys in high voices from the bathroom or the depths of a cupboard. When everything is going along smoothly, I love this moment of the day. I'd like to gather them together in a big bunch and hug them all—all three together—because they are so eager, so enthusiastic, so vulnerable, and their eyes are so radiant. But when I'm tired or sick or a little blue, I'm never quite up to their homecoming. After the silence of the house on a low day, the life, the energy, the noise they bring with them is as painful as going from total darkness into a room with glaring lights.

The day I heard about Mary Louise's death was one of those days. I told Teddy to go outdoors if he was going to shout and

scuffle, that I simply would not put up with it in the house. I told Linda that her room was a disgrace and that as far as her allowance went she wasn't living up to her end of the bargain. Whereupon she said she was going next door to play, and I let her go, almost gratefully. Barbara, who is ten, has a talent for staying out of the centre of such conflicts, and by the time the two older children had departed, I discovered her in her room, her school clothes already exchanged for play clothes, innocently drawing a picture of a ballet dancer and popping bubble gum.

"I wish you wouldn't chew that nasty stuff," I said irritably to her. "You have no idea how awful its sounds."

"O.K.," she said cheerfully, removed the gum and placed it on top of her jewelry box. Then: "Do you have a headache?" she asked.

Suddenly I felt very guilty. "No, darling, I haven't. I'm just sad today. That's why I'm kind of crabby."

"Oh."

"The reason I'm sad," I continued, although she hadn't asked, "is that I just found out a very dear friend of mine died. Do you remember Mary Louise Winterhalter? She visited us once? She had blond hair and a little girl."

"No."

"Well, she was a very dear friend of mine, and she died. It would be as if Christine should die for you."

Barbara said nothing—just went on colouring.

Suddenly I felt I had to get out of the house, get my mind on another track, see someone, do something, get out of the morbid mood I was in. I was sick of wallowing in my melancholy.

"You want to go to the store with me, honey?" I asked, thinking of the suit in Miner's window. I didn't need a suit. I didn't want a suit even. But I could go and try it on, bring it home, avoid a lot of extra words with Mother. And at the same time maybe the lights and bustle around the Centre, a sundae.

at the drugstore perhaps, would dissipate the morbid mood.

"Can I buy something?" Barbara asked warily.

"Yes. I'll give you a dime to spend in the dime store. And we'll get a hot fudge sundae."

The last Tuesday of every month Roy stays downtown for dinner and works late at the office, getting things set up for Daisy Day ads in the newspapers. He usually comes home around eleven, has a highball or two to clear his head, as he says, and goes to bed, exhausted. On these nights Mother usually drops over to chat during the evening and to help me catch up on my mending. I hate to sit by myself during an entire evening, and this way time passes, the mending gets done, and it's very pleasant. We usually wait until Roy gets home, and then we have a cup of coffee while he is having his highball. But the past few months, since the children are older now, I have occasionally gone to Mother's instead—after they are all in bed, of course, and leaving Mother's phone number in case they need anything. Actually, I prefer to spend the evening that way; I guess it's just getting out of my own house as much as anything.

At any rate, on this particular Tuesday I certainly needed to get out of the house. The trip to the Centre had not succeeded in dissipating my mood. We ate chili for dinner, and after I had settled the children with their homework, their radios and Mother's telephone number, I took Miner's blue suit and drove the three miles to Woodrow Avenue.

Woodrow Avenue is my favourite Twin Cities street, and I don't think it's just because I happened to grow up there. It's not *the* street in St. Paul by any means, but it has a certain dignity about it that I value and that I can't imagine the streets in our subdivision ever attaining. Old elm trees grow along the sidewalk, and their branches meet and touch across the street, forming a kind of stately arch for the traffic. The houses are elderly—not old—fat, generous, placid, well

groomed. The lawns are all beautiful and green (no dandelions) and well sprinkled. Some of the gardens have mountain ash trees. (Ours did, and I used to love to play with the orange berries when I was little, using them for doll food, I guess.) Everyone has huge lilac hedges. Some gardens have a sundial, or a bird bath, or formal plots of cannas, like a park. Why don't people plant cannas any more? And why are sundials out of fashion? Still, when I looked at our own yard with a view to planting cannas or getting a sundial, I could see how wrong either one would look. But it's not the fault of the cannas or the sundials: it's the atmosphere on our street, I think.

But maybe Woodrow Avenue had the same atmosphere in its youth. I hope so. Because it would be nice to feel that some day our street, our house, would possess that serene, comfortable, permanent feeling. There isn't a bit of plastic in Mother's house, for instance, no wrought iron, no rough surfaces or bare floors. It's all mirrors and warm shining woods, comfortable chairs *without slipcovers*, rugs and high ceilings and chocolate creams in silver compotes. I like it. I like to go there when I'm by myself and don't have to worry about my children devouring all the chocolate creams and wiping their sticky fingers on the chairs without slipcovers. It's as restful and peaceful as an empty church.

Mother and Dad were having some coffee and brandy in the living room when I arrived, and they had a third cup and a third snifter waiting on the coffee table for me.

"Ruthie! You look horrible! Bilious. What's the matter with you? Or is it your hair that needs doing?" Mother began.

"I've had a foul day," I said, tossing the Miner's box on the couch and sitting down beside it. "I disobeyed you and brooded."

"That's not a very nice way to greet your daughter, Harriet," Dad said. Then: "You look all right to me, kid. How about some brandy?"

"Love some, thanks. . . . I got the suit."

"How does it look? Does it fit?"

"It fits perfectly. I don't know how it looks. You can see."

"Well, I wouldn't wonder you couldn't tell how it looks. Before you try it on, go up and fix your hair and put on some fresh makeup or something."

Dad handed me the brandy. "Brooding, eh? About Mary Louise?"

"Yes."

"Well, I don't blame you. What did Mother do, tell you not to brood?"

"All I did was say, 'Don't go brooding about Mary Louise all day.' And I still think you shouldn't have. After all, there's nothing you can do. Write Don a nice note, of course. And of course we'll hear before long what caused her death. A person always hears things like that eventually. You go brooding about all the things that can happen to a person and no wonder you look bilious."

"It's not that, Mother. I don't know. It's just I seem to be losing touch with everything. Here Mary Louise dies. And I don't know how she died. And there's no way I can find out—"

"Well, of course there is," Mother broke in. "Call Don. If it's depressing you so much, why don't you call Don and find out? Go directly to the source." Mother has always believed in going directly to the source of things: to the principal instead of to the teacher, to the complaint department instead of to the sales clerk.

"I thought of it," I replied. "But I'd rather not. I thought of calling Ethelyn too. She might know more."

"I think that makes some sense," Dad said. "Why don't you go ahead and call her if you feel like it? You can use the upstairs phone."

"Oh, I don't know. Long distance always seems so urgent. This isn't really urgent. It's just a feeling. I'll get over it."

But the more I thought of it, the more I thought I would like to talk to Ethelyn. We sat and sipped our brandy and

coffee and I looked at the pictures of Lucy's baby. And Mother wanted to know in greater detail what the orthodontist had said about Linda's teeth, and if Roy was making any headway on the rumpus room. Dad put on his glasses and opened his copy of *Time*. And after I had finished my coffee and brandy, I took the suit and went up to Mother's room to try it on. I combed my hair and put on some fresh lipstick. Then all of a sudden, looking at the phone on the little table next to Mother's chaise, I decided it would be quite simple and feasible to call Ethelyn. And I also knew it was exactly what I needed to rid myself of the morbid mood.

"Daddy, I think I'll take you up on that offer to call Ethelyn," I called downstairs.

"Fine. Go ahead. Help yourself."

I heard Mother get up and turn on the television, and I closed the bedroom door, dialled the operator and put in the call to Chicago.

The phone rang five times before Ethelyn answered.

"Mrs. Ethelyn Campbell," the operator said.

"This is she."

"St. Paul, Minnesota, calling. Go ahead, please."

I could hear what sounded like a little gasp. Then Ethelyn said in an urgent, too loud voice, "Hello!" Hearing her voice, with its familiar husky tension, I knew right away I should not have called Ethelyn. Ethelyn has always been nervous—high-strung, we used to call her. I have always had the feeling about Ethelyn that she goes around without any skin, so to speak, to protect her. Everything impinges on her so directly that she can't stand anything for long. You have the feeling with her that she is running over a bed of hot coals in her bare feet: laughing too hard always, crying if she feels like it, swearing a lot, racing from one subject to the next in her conversation. If I had been shaken by the news about Mary Louise, if I felt that long-distance calls were urgent, what would the news, the call, do to Ethelyn?

"Ethelyn, this is Ruthie. Ruthie Harkness."

"Ruthie! For God's sake! How are you? What's wrong? Is anything wrong?"

"No. No. Nothing's wrong. I'm just fine."

Now, then, how was I going to tell her without having her go to pieces over the telephone? I could see her, after we had finished talking, pouring herself a big drink, the way she always had done at the lake whenever a crisis arose. She would pace around, pick at her thumbs, chew the insides of her cheeks. I had been through some big crises with Ethelyn at the lake, and I certainly should have known better than to call her.

"Well, I'm delighted to hear from you, darling, but what the hell is up? Tell me quick. Get it over with."

"It's messy," I said. "And I'm a complete fool to have called you at this hour. It's just that I've been so upset myself all day."

"What?" she almost screamed.

"It's about Mary Louise. Ethelyn, she's dead. She died last Friday. Had you heard about it yet?" I tried to keep my voice calm, matter-of-fact

"What? Mary Louise *Winterhalter*?"

"Yes. Aunt Helen was in Boston last week, and she discovered it quite by chance in a Boston paper. But there's nothing about what caused it or anything, and it's been driving me crazy all day. I thought you might possibly have heard more. That's why I called, I guess."

"Oh, my God, no! I hadn't heard anything. That's awful. . . . My God, Ruthie, it's horrible!" But she seemed to be holding on to herself after all.

"I don't know why it got me so," I continued. "I thought of calling Don. But you know that would be kind of phoney. I guess I just wanted to talk to an old friend as much as anything."

"Yes. Of course. Oh, Ruthie, it's terrifying, isn't it? Listen, I'll call Don. I don't care if he hangs up on me. I'll find out for us and let you know. Or I could call Bruce. He might have



heard something." Bruce is Ethelyn's brother, and he had been in love with Mary Louise for years.

"No. Don't do all that. We'll hear some other way without making an issue of it. I shouldn't even have called you. But it was just that the whole thing made me feel so sort of empty or nostalgic or something. . . . Gee, I wish we could get together."

"So do I."

"Listen," I said, suddenly inspired. "You can get away easily. Why don't you come up next week? Roy's going to Chicago. We could have a regular old-fashioned hen session."

"Oh, I couldn't, Ruthie. I just couldn't."

"Why not?" Ethelyn has no children.

She paused, and her voice was very husky when she replied. "I just couldn't, that's all."

And I thought then that in spite of her marriage to Clarence she must still be mourning for Phil. Ethelyn had been back to Minnesota only twice since Phil's death, even though her parents were both still living and in Stillwater. She told me once that the minute the train started to back into Union Depot in St. Paul her stomach began to churn, and she felt as if she might vomit.

Then I had another inspiration. "Look," I cried. "Maybe I could get away, come down to Chicago with Roy and spend a couple of days with you. How would that suit you?"

She hesitated. "It would suit me fine," she said at last. "It's just that I've been feeling so like hell lately. I wouldn't be very good company, I'm afraid."

"What's the matter?"

"Oh . . . I don't know. Life. November. Nothing I can put my finger on."

"Well, if that's all, we're tailor-made for each other right now. I've been feeling the same way. It might do us both a lot of good."

"I'm sure it would."

"You don't sound sure. Look, if this is a bad time for any reason at all, just say so. I wouldn't want to impose."

"You wouldn't be imposing. You know that, Ruthie. I'd love to see you. You know that too."

"Well, why don't I see what I can arrange on this end with Mother about the kids? And with Roy. And you think it over too. And then I'll call you again sometime tomorrow. O.K.?"

"Fine. That sounds fine."

Is there any moment as reverberatingly silent as the moment you hang up after a long-distance phone call? I lit a cigarette and sat in Mother's chaise with my feet up. Poor Ethelyn, I thought, as lonely, as miserable and tense as ever. My own troubles seemed small compared with hers, my own life happy compared with hers. All at once I found myself thinking of Jerry Gates, a wonderful man I (and Ethelyn also) had known rather well during that last summer of the war at Lake Minnehaha, a man I hadn't thought of in years. "Ruthie," he had said to me once, "you're the sort of person that lives happily ever after."

Perhaps, without knowing it, I really was such a person. Or would be. Or could be. As I sat there in Mother's chaise that evening, the echoes of my conversation with Ethelyn dying away into memories of other moods, people, places, times, I felt as if I might be on the threshold of a renaissance, the sort of renaissance I understand occurs fairly often after the age of thirty-five.

After I had finished my cigarette I put on the blue suit and went back downstairs. Mother thought it was perfect for me.

"You've got to get away from that college-girl look sometime, Ruthie, and this suit is *it*. It's stunning on you. It needs different shoes, though. Navy pumps. And a really smart little hat." And then she went on to give me one of her "making the most of yourself" lectures: My skin was marvellous, according to her, and always had been, and so were my legs. So why go clomping around forever in flat-heeled shoes? "And your

eyes would *look* blue, my dear, instead of merely *being* blue, if you'd become a connoisseur of blues." As for my hair, it would not always remain brown, if I knew what she meant, and it was just plain time to abandon the sweaters and pearls and start trying to acquire a little dignity, a little presence, a little *real* smartness. . . .

Dad hates it when Mother starts rattling on about clothes, and after remarking that he thought the suit was very becoming he turned the talk back to my conversation with Ethelyn.

"How does she get along with her new husband? She like being a faculty wife?"

"I'm sure she does. But you can't really chat on long distance, you know."

"I hope you weren't thinking of our phone bill," Dad said. "Because you could have talked as long as you liked."

"I know, Dad. I wasn't. It's just that it's hard for me, at least, to visit on long distance."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Ruthie, why can't you visit on long distance? You get more niggly every day. Really." This was a direct crack by Mother at Roy's and my attempt to live within our income, and I ignored it. I was sick of discussing the subject with Roy, and I was sick of discussing the subject with Mother. In fact, with both of them, it had become one of those Eternal Issues, the kind of grievance that is always there, sulking in the corner. I had learned over the years to avert my face from its presence, to make detours around it, to devise little distractions before its presence was noticed.

But Mother, for some reason, would not be distracted that evening, and when I tried to turn the subject back to my tentative Chicago trip she said, "Well, you *know* I'll be glad to have the children. All I'm thinking of is Roy. How do you think he'll feel about such a trip?"

"I'm sure he'll think it's fine. We were saying just the other night we needed a vacation from the kids. You know, day in, day out with the kids and you sort of lose touch with each

other." We hadn't been saying that just the other night, but I intended to say it to him tonight, and I was sure he'd agree.

"Can he put you on his expense account?" she continued.

"Of course not. But for heaven's sake, we're not that broke."

"Well, if he thinks you are, if he thinks you can't afford it, Dad will give you something, won't you, Sam?"

"Of course."

"We won't need anything, Mother. I said we're not that broke."

"You don't have to get huffy about it. It so happens we were that broke at your age."

"I'm sorry, dear." Why did I always have to misinterpret her good intentions, antagonize her when she was only trying to show her love for us—for Roy and me and the children?

"It's all right," she said. "I just want to see you have that trip. I think it's just what you need right now. And you'll have a new suit to wear. And the kids won't be any problem at all."

By the time I left Mother's, around eleven, it was more or less settled that I would go to Chicago with Roy the following week.

Every marriage, I suppose, has its own rituals, its own little pockets in the day, the week, the year, that are special in some way. The rituals, the little pockets of time change and shift as one's children grow older, as one grows older oneself. When Roy and I were first married, Sunday was my favourite day in the week. We'd stay in our pajamas sometimes until three in the afternoon, cook eggs with onions or mushrooms or sour cream, try out new marmalades, listen to Beethoven on the radio, talk and laugh, even throw pillows at each other. And we always went for walks on Sunday evenings, stopping at the university library, or a movie, or a drugstore for magazines and Cokes. And it seemed as if those evenings were always full of budding trees or the kind of rain you can walk in.

With the coming of the war, and then the children, those

magical Sundays disappeared. But they were replaced by other times. When the children were little, we began to look forward to eight o'clock in the evening. Something as simple as heating up the leftover coffee from dinner and sitting on the floor together, drinking the coffee and talking about bills, children's rashes, friends' problems, vacation plans, became almost as cosy as the old Sundays. Now it is well after ten o'clock before the household has quieted down. Consequently, the after-dinner coffee hour has disappeared along with the Sundays.

But there are other times now. The night when Roy says, "Let's dump the kids in the car and go to a drive-in for supper." The day in May when we take off the storm windows, and Roy washes the windows on the outside, and I wash them on the inside, and afterward we sit on the front steps in the sunshine and share a can of beer. Loading the car, in some chilly dawn, for our annual trip to the north woods; filling Christmas stockings; hiding Easter eggs; waiting, with other parents, for the Camp Ojibawa bus. But these are impromptu times I'm speaking of, and as soon as you try to make a ritual out of one of them it disappears like cotton candy.

The only time we have that actually corresponds to those long-ago Sundays is the hour before we go to bed. Roy calls the cat, turns off the sprinkler in the garden. I turn off the children's radios, put out the milk bottles. We lock the doors, get into our pajamas, and lie for an hour or so on the couch, eating apples, watching a late show on television, talking desultorily about our separate days. It's the nicest time of the day for me, and the reason I hate Daisy Day night is that somehow we never manage this hour together on that night. Roy is always tense and exhausted on Daisy Day night, and he spends the remainder of his evening yawning, digging his fists into his eyes, tapping one foot against the footstool, as he reads the newspaper and sips his highball. And I—I usually tiptoe around, being careful not to bring up irritating subjects like broken lawn mowers, Friday-night dinner parties, or money.

So I can't understand what I was thinking of—to bring up my proposed trip to Chicago on Daisy Day night. The fact that I did bring it up was a measure, I believe, of how upsetting the whole day had been to me. Roy had just got home when I arrived. He was out in the kitchen in his underwear, mixing himself a highball. He looked dead tired. Roy is a big man, over six feet tall and fairly heavy. His hair is black, getting a little grey around the fringes. His eyes are dark brown, with long curling eyelashes any girl would envy. Although his mother was Swedish, his skin is almost as dark as a Mexican's. He has that look of innate strength about him that comes from never—absolutely never—being sick. Not even a cold. And yet on a Daisy Day night he always looks as if he were just recovering from a long siege of the flu: his skin sallow, his movements listless, his eyes pinched and bloodshot.

He was standing in his bare feet, struggling with the ice-cube tray when I came in. I kissed him and found some crackers and cheese for him, and he said he hadn't put on any coffee for me because he had assumed I was at Mother's and probably full of coffee.

"I am," I said. "I think I'll have a drink with you."

"Good."

"I've had a terrible day."

"Why? What's up? Anything special?"

"Yes. I'll tell you."

We took our drinks then, and our cheese and crackers, and went into the living room, and I told him: the whole works, all the events (except for the suit), and all the feelings. He was interested and sympathetic and seemed almost as shocked by the news of Mary Louise's death as I had been. But at a certain point in my story I was aware of a change in his attitude. How do you tell these things? By a flick of the eyelashes? A twitch of the mouth? Something had upset him, and it wasn't the news about Mary Louise. So when I had finished my recital, including my decision to accompany him to Chicago, and

when he said nothing except "Well, I don't know. Let's table the motion for tonight and think it over," I decided to find out what was troubling him.

We were both silent for a minute. Then I said, "What's the matter?"

"Nothing. Why?"

But there was a slightly guilty edge to his voice that made me sure something was the matter. "There is *too* something the matter." Then it dawned on me. "Oh, honey, don't tell me you think we're being subsidized again! Is that it?"

"Well, aren't we?"

"Oh, Roy! I just knew that's what you were thinking. I could tell. You changed the minute I mentioned Dad telling me to call Ethelyn."

And suddenly, without warning, there we were, right in the middle of the Eternal Issue on Daisy Day night! There are times, I think, when one is tired, out of patience with a certain subject or issue, disappointed and discouraged about things in general, and sick of forever trying to keep things going along smoothly. At such times one almost longs for a good fight, the way one longs, sometimes, for a wild storm, after days and days of summer sunshine.

"Let's talk about it in the morning, Ruthie," Roy said mildly, rubbing his eyes.

But no! I had to push on. "Can you tell me one good reason," I asked, "why it's so important for us to pay for a long-distance call? Do you think it makes one bit of difference to Dad whether his phone bill is five dollars or fifty? But it does make a difference to him to be able to do nice things for his only child—to him and to Mother. Can't you see how silly and selfish it is to be so stuffy about accepting things from them when we're almost their sole pleasure in life?"

Roy took off his glasses. "Ruthie, we've been all through this before. Let's forget it for tonight. Please!"

But I rushed on. "We've not only been through it before,

but *I've* been through it once before this very night. You and Mother are absolutely impossible on this subject. And speaking of Mother, you may as well know now as later: I have a new suit. I don't need a suit, I admit, any more than I needed that rotisserie. But that's completely beside the point, and you'll never be able to see it that way. Now, as far as this Chicago trip goes, we can afford it because I can stay at Ethelyn's. And even if we can't afford it, I still can't see anything so terrible about letting Dad help us out a little. After all, the money will all be mine eventually anyhow. Why not spend some of it now while they're still here to see us enjoy it?"

"Look," he said. "You're not going if the trip hinges on your staying at Ethelyn's. That's called sponging."

"Sponging! Have you ever heard of paying a friend a visit?"

He was silent a minute. "Sure. That's one thing. And if Ethelyn wants you, fine. Of course. But please, for God's sake, don't say as far as the money goes you can stay at Ethelyn's. That is sponging. That attitude."

"Speaking of attitudes," I said, "it seems to me you could examine some of your attitudes. If you don't want me to go to Chicago with you, just say so. If we're so broke we can't afford it, and if you're so stuffy you can't accept a little help from Dad, just say so. And I'll stay home. I'll stay home and . . ." I could feel myself starting to cry, so I took a big swallow of my drink.

Then I made a decision. "No," I said, trying to keep my voice calm and icy. "I won't stay home. If Ethelyn can't have me, if we can't afford a hotel room for me, *I'll* accept the help from Dad. Because I'm going to Chicago. I'm going to get out of here for a while. Because I'm so damned sick and tired of this meaningless round of things I do . . . and everything . . . and I'm so bored and sick of everything I could scream." Now I was really crying, bawling my head off, and it felt good. I just buried my face in my arms and cried and cried.

Roy came over and sat on the arm of my chair and put his



arm around me. "Ruthie, I didn't start this," he said. "You started it. All I said was 'Let's not decide anything tonight.' I feel that's a perfectly reasonable thing to say. I didn't say, or think, one thing about your parents. You brought that up yourself."

"That's not true," I sobbed. "You looked upset and I said, 'You think we're being subsidized again, don't you,' and you said, 'Aren't we.'"

The "aren't we" did it. It sounded so ridiculous, hanging there in the middle of the air (the accused was guilty of saying "Aren't we"), that I started to laugh. "You did say 'Aren't we,' you awful fiend," I choked, laughing and crying at the same time.

"Move over and let me sit down," Roy said. I moved over, but the chair wasn't big enough for both of us, so I sat on his lap.

He wiped my tears away with the bottom of his undershirt, and I finally quieted down and found my handkerchief and blew my nose. Then I said, leaning comfortably against his shoulder, "Well, but what did upset you, honey? I won't put any more words in your mouth."

"Nothing. I'm just beat, as usual, tonight. And strapped, as usual, at the end of the month. And all I did was ask you to wait until tomorrow to decide. Actually, it's quite likely you can come to Chicago with me. Let's just wait till tomorrow to make plans. That's all."

I could see his point. I really could. But I still felt hurt. "I guess what got me," I said, "is that Mother was so sure you'd have some objections. And I thought you'd be just delighted. And then when you weren't . . . Honey, do you realize it's been almost three years since we've been any place overnight without the kids?"

"I know," he said soberly.

"Everything just hit me today for some reason. And it just seemed like everything was empty and dumb. And I thought

it would be so wonderful to get away together for just a few days, even. Even just the train trip down there together would be wonderful. And then I could spend time with Ethelyn while you were busy. And when you weren't busy, we could go out on the town, maybe—alone, or maybe with Ethelyn and Clarence. I don't know. Can't you see how I could have reacted the way I did when you didn't get real enthusiastic?"

He turned my chin so he could look at me. "Sure," he said tenderly. Then he kissed me, and I cried a little more, and we went to bed.

I don't know what would have happened to my Chicago trip if Clarence had not called me the next morning. A good cry, a fight plus a reconciliation, can be almost as refreshing as a trip or a vacation, and in the morning, before Clarence's call, I had lost all desire to go to Chicago. Why should I go to Chicago (in search of what? my soul?) when everything I loved and wanted was right here in my own home? Here was Roy, glowing and refreshed from a good night's sleep and his morning shower, looking as clean and crisp as only a man in a white shirt can look. Here was Barbara asking, "Do birds have cousins?" And here was Teddy, for once, answering her politely and explaining cousinship in great detail to her. And my beautiful, beautiful Linda, with her hair like pale satin and her incredible snaky eyes, staring into her oatmeal, feeling outraged, as usual, at the injustices that might possibly be perpetrated against her that day. They needed me. I needed them! Why should I go to Chicago for even a few days? I had African violets here, and a blue-and-white pitcher for milk, and a clock with a pendulum, and the winter sun would soon be pouring through the kitchen window while I washed the breakfast dishes. It's amazing how, overnight, one's whole perspective can change; the mood or decision of the previous night can seem sometimes not only invalid, but even fantastic—completely foreign to one.

"Let's me not go to Chicago after all," I said to Roy as I kissed him goodbye that morning.

"Anything you say, Mrs. Aren't We." And he grinned. "I won't take that as a final answer, though, since I notice you're planning to iron today."

Half an hour later the telephone rang.

"Ruth? Clarence Campbell speaking." Clarence has the deep voice, the precise diction common to certain actors, ministers and college professors. "I'm being presumptuous, I know, calling you like this. But I wanted to urge you to come next week if you can."

"Is anything wrong, Clarence? With Ethelyn? What<sup>^</sup> is it?"

"No. No. Nothing unusual, that is. I have to be out of town next week, and Ethelyn hasn't been too well this fall, you know—"

"She mentioned that last night," I interrupted. "What is it, Clarence? Do you know?"

"Oh—I think she's just let herself get run down. And she's stubborn, you know. Won't go for a checkup. Actually, I think she's worn out. She got herself in quite a stew over her prelims, of course."

"Her prelims?"

He laughed. "Didn't you know Ethelyn was fixing to become a doctor of philosophy?"

"No, I certainly did not." I laughed a little too. "Isn't that a little out of character for Ethelyn?"

"Ruth," he said judiciously, "just between you and me, I think you've put your finger right on the trouble. Furthermore, I think a nice visit with you would do her a world of good."

"Thank you," I said. But I was puzzled. Certainly Clarence could not attach so much therapeutic value to a visit from me that he would bother to call me long distance at nine o'clock in the morning. There must be something else. "I was awfully sorry I called Ethelyn last night," I said. "And dumped all

that unpleasantness in her lap. I certainly wouldn't have if I had stopped to think for a minute. Did it upset her terribly?"

"She had a pretty rough night, all right," he replied. "She called her brother after she talked to you."

"Oh, really? What did he say?"

He hesitated. "I think I'll leave the details to Ethelyn," he said. "A pretty nasty business, I understand."

"Was it--" I hesitated and laughed self-consciously—"was it female trouble of some sort, as Mother put it?"

"I guess you'd call it that," he replied. "Anyhow, it upset Ethelyn pretty badly, and I'd feel a lot better about her, given her present mood and this business, if you could see your way to spending a few days with her. I wanted her to come along with me. It's our annual meeting in New York. But she says she doesn't feel up to it."

"Actually I can come and I will, Clarence. I started to think twice about it this morning. But Mother is perfectly willing to take the kids, and there's no reason why I can't come."

"Good. Good. Next Monday, did you say?"

"Yes. As far as I know. I'll get it all straight with Roy tonight and let Ethelyn know. I assume she's asleep or not there or something right now?"

"She's asleep."

"Well, you tell her all is arranged, and I'll write or call or wire or something, soon as I know definite times."

"Fine. Good. I'm awfully grateful to you."

"Not at all. It will be wonderful for me too."

"Sorry I'll miss seeing you."

"You too."

"Regards to Roy," he concluded. And we hung up.

The situation was reversed now: Rather than having to find reasons and excuses for going to Chicago, I would now be obliged to find reasons and excuses if I wanted to stay home. But Roy couldn't see it that way. Now he kept urging me to stay at the hotel with him, kept telling me I didn't want

to spend a vacation playing nursemaid, being stuck 'way out on the South Side, etc., etc. He couldn't seem to get it through his head that it was a completely different trip I was planning now from the one that I had proposed originally. But in the end, of course, he saw the point, and by the night before we were to leave we were both as pleased and excited about the trip as we should have been in the first place.

We left on the morning train. The air was mild and still, the sky full of snow. By the time we reached the country around Red Wing it was snowing—great lazy flakes, the kind that drift around little sled figures in paperweights. I love trees without leaves. I love that rolling country in southern Minnesota. I love the way the Mississippi River looks in the winter, so secret and unapproachable. If I'm travelling by car, I prefer that the landscape be autumnal. But the winter fields, bare and dead, the little huddled stations you whiz by, the vapour coming out of the mouths of horses or people, seen for only a moment: this is the kind of landscape I prefer when I'm riding on a train.

All this by way of saying I was happy that morning. I was wearing my new suit. I had a cheque for a hundred dollars in my purse. (Dad said my birthday present hadn't amounted to much this year—the rotisserie—and he wanted me to have a special treat on him in the Big City.) I felt excited—even exhilarated: here I was on the morning train to Chicago, roaring through a picture-book snowstorm, with the prospect of four free days ahead of me. Four free days with an old friend, discussing old times, unhampered by children or dinners to cook or the hum of the clothes dryer. Yet I couldn't allow myself to be completely happy. I couldn't let myself forget that Ethelyn would not be at her best, that she might, in fact, be very trying company, and that, above all, I had come to try to help her. Then, too, speculations about Mary Louise kept haunting me.

"Roy," I said at last, "let's talk."

He put down the book he had been reading. "O.K. Shoot."

"Oh, 'shoot' yourself! That's not the kind of talk I mean."

He grinned. "Is it your feeling, then, Mrs. Harkness, that contemporary architecture has not met the needs of contemporary man?"

I laughed. "Oh, stop! No. Really. Seriously, I've been thinking about Mary Louise. What do you suppose happened to her? I wish I'd made Clarence tell me."

"He did tell you. Female trouble. If he's like me, he couldn't have told you any more if he'd wanted to."

"Of course he could."

"But he couldn't have told you how many months it took or what the doctor thought or how it felt."

"Roy! It's not a subject to try to be witty about."

He sobered. "I know it. It's just that it's one of those subjects it's useless to speculate about. Besides, you'll know in a few hours."

"I know. It haunts me, though. Wouldn't it be horrible to die right now? I don't feel as if I've started to live yet. Really live, I mean. Don't you feel that way?"

"No. I've been living for a long time."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, what do you call living?"

I stared out the window. "I don't know," I said at last. I felt his eyes on me, and I looked back and smiled. "I see what you mean, though I suppose it's all in how you define living, is that it?"

He nodded.

I picked up my magazines then—*Vogue*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Parents*—and began to browse through them. They all seemed kind of silly and boring to me. There were some pictures of Florida in *Vogue*. "Look," I said after a while. "Remember Florida? It didn't look like that when we were there,

did it?" I was referring to our life in Orlando during 1943, when Roy was stationed at the air base there.

"No. It had somewhat more reality then."

"I loved it then. I bet I'd hate it now. Look at all these outlandish play clothes."

He put down his book and looked.

Suddenly I had an overwhelming urge to be back in Orlando. "Roy, we had fun the e, didn't we?" I said. "The war was peculiar. It's an awful thing to say, but those were some of our best times, weren't they?"

Roy nodded, but he didn't answer for a minute. Finally he said, "People are afraid to admit they liked the war. But they did. Not all of it. But the good parts were as good as the bad parts were bad, if you know what I mean."

"I do!"

And before long, where should we be but right back in Orlando in 1943. Back with Sergeant Olander and his squeaky bedsprings, back with mint gin and the boys in the Engineers who fought with crank handles when they got drunk, back with a couple we knew there from Sandusky, Ohio, named Myrt and Milt. We hadn't reminisced about those days for ages, and it was wonderful fun

"We ought to go to Sandusky sometime and look up Myrt and Milt," Roy said.

"Why?"

"I liked Milt. He was so goddamned refreshingly simple. Remember our philosophical discussion with him?"

Roy never got over that philosophical discussion. We had been talking one night with Myrt and Milt about life and death and good and bad and love and hate and all those things you used to talk about during the war sitting in bars. And Milt hadn't been saying much on the subject. He just kept downing beers. And when Roy and I had finished talking (Myrt hadn't been saying much either), Milt said. "Well, the way I look at it is this: All I ask out of a day is three squares

and a jump. Anything else is gravy." Roy thought that was one of the most deeply philosophical remarks he had ever heard. Ever since then, whenever the conversation even approaches Life's Meaning, he has to quote Milt—especially if he's been drinking. I had thought the remark was pretty good at the time too, but over the years I had become so weary of hearing Roy repeat the story (and he always added a bit about how "you should have seen the goddamned beatific smile Myrt turned on him") that his bringing it up now as a new subject of conversation irritated me a little.

"You don't really think we'd have anything in common with them anymore, do you?"

"Why not? They were a pair of honest people."

"Oh, Roy. They were nice, of course. Hearts as big as all outside, if that's what you mean by honest. But we had absolutely nothing but the war in common with them, you know. The war and the fact we were both new to Orlando."

"All right, honey," he said. "We won't go to Sandusky."

Roy picked up his book again, and I knew I had said something wrong. "Roy, what is it? What did I say just now that made you mad?"

"I'm not mad. I just said we won't go to Sandusky if you don't want to."

"Well, really! How silly! You were just kidding about all that anyhow, weren't you?"

"Of course I was."

I stared out the window at the passing landscape. Roy is so funny sometimes. You start kidding about something, and he turns serious. Or you are serious about something, and he turns it into a big joke or a witty remark. And in either case, if you don't go along with his mood he has a tendency to sulk. We had been having such a good time, such a wonderful, leisurely conversation—the kind that takes place usually only on trains, or in bars, or by the shores of a lake. I was determined not to



in the open air, on a platform, with familiar ordinary-looking people and things about you: housewives, school children, bakery trucks, dogs. That way it doesn't take so long to shake your train trance, which is something akin to sea legs, I think. When you get off a train in a city, you always have to walk for what seems like miles through a regular nightmare world of engines and motors and clangings and strange odours and drippings and puddles. The martinis didn't help any. I knew I'd feel woozy, and I did. I even had a little headache starting up the back of my neck.

But I didn't mind. We'd had a wonderful trip, after all. Roy put his arm around my waist as we walked through that station-underworld. "If it gets too tough for you at Ethelyn's, remember you can always come down to the hotel."

"I'll have to wait and see how she is, darling. I'm sure it won't be too tough, though. I have a hunch she just has a more extreme version of the same blues I had. She always has a more extreme version of anything."

Ethelyn was waiting for us at the gate to the track. I hadn't seen her for four years, but she looked exactly the same. I seem to see people in terms of animals sometimes (Mary Louise, for instance, was always a blond cocker spaniel to me), and Ethelyn has always reminded me of a cat -- a beautiful small silken black cat. She can't be more than five feet two, and she is one of those rare short women who are perfectly proportioned. Small hands, small feet, small fine bones. And she moves like a cat—with her whole body. You can almost see those small perfect bones moving and rippling under her creamy skin. She has jet black hair. Very thick, straight and smooth. Almost Japanese, if she didn't wear it short in a kind of arty, gamine effect. She has light brown eyes, amber almost, and I suppose it's the eyes as much as the rest of her that produce this cat impression.

Anyhow, there stood Ethelyn in a mink jacket and the high-heeled pumps she always wore, smiling and waving franti-

cally to us. She rushed over, threw her arms around me and kissed me on the cheek. "Oh Ruthie! God, I'm glad to see you!" And it wasn't until we held each other at arm's length (the way you do after a greeting) that I realized her eyes were full of tears, that there was a haggard, drawn look about her face.

Poor Ethelyn! What *was* it? Had her marriage to Clarence become one of those desperate measures that fail? Sometimes life drives a person to the wall, and the person is forced to look about quickly and choose, at once, any avenue of escape. From what? Death? Madness? A despair that is worse than either? I don't know. All I know is that Ethelyn had her back to the wall in 1950, the year she married Clarence. Right after Phil's death in 1945 she moved to Chicago. When she met Clarence she had been living in Chicago for over four years, living in a sort of upper class bohemian atmosphere on the Near North Side, working in an editorial capacity for some medical organization, living a very gay smart kind of life. On the surface, that is. The two or three times I saw her during those years she was just about as bright and brittle as you can get without cracking. If you had asked Ethelyn to list the three most important things in her life at that time she would have listed Scotch lobster and shoes in that order.

Well, she did crack finally, I'm sure. After all, you can't go through life not caring about anyone or anything. She met Clarence while he was recovering from his divorce. (As I understand it his wife left him for a jazz piano player, and it was pretty hard on him for a while.) He is fifteen years older than Ethelyn is, a very distinguished looking man. He is on the faculty at the University of Chicago—a social scientist of some sort, I believe. And he's a very pleasant and attractive person. I had met him only once, of course—four years before on my last trip to Chicago. But meeting him even that once, I could certainly see how Ethelyn might have chosen him, even welcomed him, as the avenue of escape from her unbearably

empty life. And if the emptiness had remained, if the marriage had proved to be no escape, merely a further entrapment, what then?

I didn't believe for a minute that worry over the prelims for a Ph.D. could make Ethelyn's face look that haggard. I was glad I had come. I would soon find out what was troubling her. It came over me again that we need old friends, need them terribly. Looking at Ethelyn's face, I wondered if Roy was thinking about his little sponging speech!

When we had finished our greeting Ethelyn turned to him and held out both hands. "Roy, how nice to see you. You're looking marvellous."

"So are you, Ethelyn."

She smiled. She was getting hold of herself now, the tears drying up in her eyes. "You've put on a little weight, haven't you? It's becoming."

"Oh, I don't know." Roy hitched his trousers and smiled, a little uncomfortably, I thought.

"Of course you have, honey. You've put on a good twenty pounds since Ethelyn saw you last."

"Four years! My God!" Ethelyn linked her arm through mine. "Roy, where are your bags? My car is parked miles away, of course. But let's get out of here soon. I can't stand train stations. You always see someone being met with a wheel chair or something."

"I'll find our man." Roy turned and walked toward a baggage wagon.

Ethelyn opened her purse and took out her cigarettes. "Do you want a cigarette? No. I bet you still don't smoke standing up, do you? Remember how you said once your mother told you that was a good rule for ladies to follow about smoking? I always remember that. It's fantastic. How is Harriet?"

"Just the same. Enough energy for eight people. She's keeping the kids."

"How are the kids, Ruthie? How's my boy Teddy?"

"Big. Huge. He's almost sixteen, you know."

"No! Sixteen. I can't believe it. God, if I saw him I'd probably say, 'Tadpole tinkle in the hollyhocks.' Remember that? People are awful. I never thought I'd even have such an impulse. But I know I'd say it. Do you still call him Tadpole?"

"Heavens, no. He'd kill us."

Roy came back with the bags. "All set. Where do we go from here?"

"You two stay put now. I'll go get the car."

"Nonsense. Tell me where it is. I'll get it," Roy said.

We waited in the vestibule of the station, near the street, for Roy and the car. Outside it was grey, cold, damp. No snow here. Just wind, blowing little whirls of dust, soot, gum wrappers along the wide sidewalk. I wanted to ask Ethelyn about Mary Louise, but I decided to wait until we were settled in her living room and could really talk. Instead I said, "You've seen Roy since 1955."

"I have?" she replied blankly. She seemed miles away now, in a world of her own.

"Yes. I just remembered. It must have been in 1957. He had dinner with you and Clarence on one of his trips. I remember it was 'fifty-seven because that's the year Linda had that terrible strep throat. She got it while Roy was away. And I can remember sitting in her room the night Roy got back, and he was telling me all about your new apartment. And Linda had a fever dream about pink corduroy. You had pink corduroy curtains, I think. She must have heard us subconsciously, because she dreamed she was falling on pink corduroy."

"You're right," Ethelyn said. Suddenly she was back again, out of her own world. She laughed. "Ruthie, you're just the same. I can see you when you're eighty years old being able to recall what you had for breakfast this morning. I bet you remember every telephone number you've ever had."

"That's no trick. I've only had four."

"Have you really? I must have had ninety-two." She laughed

again, began to tell me what finally happened to her pink corduroy curtains, stopped to stare at a little Mongoloid child in a blue velvet bonnet, wound up swearing at a run in her stocking. If I was the same, she too was the same, only more so. Whatever her current troubles were, they had accentuated her familiar nervous habits and mannerisms.

Roy pulled up with the car finally, got out, came for the bags, loaded mine into Ethelyn's back seat. Then he put his arm around me. "Well, girls," he said. "What night shall we have dinner? How about tomorrow night?"

"Fine with me," Ethelyn said.

So we settled on dinner for the next night, and Roy ~~st~~<sup>h</sup>alled a passing cab. As the cab pulled up to the curb he picked up his bag, kissed me. "Goodbye," he said. "Have fun. You know where I am if you need anything."

Ethelyn was leaning on the open car door, watching us—rather wistfully, I thought. Suddenly I felt so lucky, so lucky and happy that it frightened me. "Wait," I called. And I kissed him again before he got into the cab. "Th u's for good luck. Or one to grow on, or something." We were all embarrassed then—Roy and Ethelyn and the cab driver and myself, and we waved self-consciously to each other (the three of us) as the cab pulled away.

Ethelyn drives the way she talks: in spurts and jerks, impulsive decisions that make people blow their horns at her. She jumps from lane to lane and speeds along at sixty, then drops to thirty for no apparent reason. After a few minutes in the car with her I gave up trying to talk—to converse, that is. Yes, she was working for her Ph.D. in philosophy. Yes, she would become a doctor of philosophy in philosophy, but let's not talk about it now, for God's sake. It gave her a headache. Yes, she ~~still~~<sup>still</sup> had headaches. She kept up a stream of comments then, on Christmas shopping, Chicago politics, Chicago weather, good places to eat, the trouble she had finding shoes—as if she

had to keep talking, talking, to fill the gap of time that sometimes yawns between old friends newly encountered. Or as if, by calling my attention to alterations they were making on the Outer Drive, she could keep me from looking at her despair. But I knew she couldn't keep up such frenetic and meaningless chatter for long; I knew that once we were settled comfortably in her apartment over a cup of coffee she would begin to talk—really talk.

But even after I had unpacked my bags in Ethelyn's guest room, changed my clothes, even after we were comfortably settled in her living room, she kept up the meaningless chatter.

"Let's have a drink. Scotch? Or do you still drink martinis? I have martinis too."

"Scotch is fine. *Coffee* is fine."

"You don't want coffee." She rattled on: "Our dinner's defrosting. I never cook any more. What's the point? They freeze anything you can think of to eat now. Do you like frozen egg rolls?"

"I've seen them in the markets, but I've never tried them. I *love* egg rolls."

"Well, that's what we're having, among other frozen delights. There's one brand that's pretty good."

"There is a surprising difference among brands, isn't there?"

"Terrific. Especially peas, if you've noticed. I can't figure it out." Ethelyn dropped ice cubes into the glasses, poured Scotch on them from the bottle. "Do you want water?"

"Just a little, please."

She poured water from a little pitcher. "Isn't this a gem?" she asked, indicating the pitcher. "Clarence got it in Denmark before we were married. Do you like Scandinavian things?"

"Darling, I live in Minnesota. Remember?"

"So you do. Well, anyhow, there's a marvellous shop in town all full of Swedish and Danish things I want to show you."

She took her drink, kicked off her pumps, curled up on the couch, her stockinged feet tucked under her. She twirled the ice cubes around the glass with her index finger for a moment.

Before she could say anything more, I raised my glass. "Well, Ethelyn, here we are at last."

She raised her glass and smiled nervously. "It's marvellous, isn't it? It's been too long."

We were both silent for a moment. "Clarence told me you called Bruce," I said finally.

Ethelyn put down her glass abruptly on the coffee table. She began to pick frantically at her thumbs, and I could see her chewing the insides of her cheeks.

"Did he know anything more?" I prompted.

"Yes," she said in a low voice. "He'd been to Boston." Then she took a deep breath and announced bitterly, "Well, he finally managed to kill her."

"Ethelyn! What are you saying?"

"I'm saying he finally managed to kill her. Do you know what happened, Ruthie? She got pregnant, had an abortion, and died."

"But why? Oh, Ethelyn, why?"

"*Why?* I think I'd have an abortion too if I suddenly turned up pregnant after keeping my husband out of my bed for close to six months. It's not quite as simple as being an unmarried mother, you know."

"But, Ethelyn! Were they still sleeping together after all these years? Bruce and Mary Louise? Tell me what it was. I haven't heard anything, really, for years. I'm shocked. I'm just so shocked I don't know what to say. I wish you hadn't told me in quite this way. Bruce didn't kill her—"

"Who else?" she snapped. "The abortionist? Why do they **always** call the abortionists 'murderers'? I prefer to put the **blame** where it belongs."

"But sometimes the blame doesn't belong anywhere. You don't always have to blame someone for something."

Ethelyn seemed not to have heard me. She laughed harshly now. "God, Ruthie, wasn't that like her, though? To get in a spot like that? You'd think she could have at least taken the precaution of sleeping with her husband every so often."

"Don't talk like that, Ethelyn. I know you don't mean it. It's a completely tragic situation."

Ethelyn had become more and more agitated. She seemed almost on the verge of hysteria: she kept smiling peculiar little smiles that weren't really smiles at all. She put down her drink, put her hand over her eyes. Then suddenly she stood up. "*Oh, shit!*" she cried. "I can't stand it!" And she ran sobbing out of the living room and into her bedroom.

I followed her, of course, and found her lying, face down, across one of the twin beds, sobbing like a little child. "Ethelyn," I said. "Look. Stop. You'll make yourself sick."

She shook her head without raising her face from the pillow.

"You stop now, dear. I'll get you a cold towel. It was hard for you to have to tell me that. But it won't seem so nightmarish to you after we talk about it for a bit."

She looked up finally. "I'm sorry, Ruthie," she said between sob-hiccoughs. "Just leave me alone a minute—I'll be all right. . . . Go have your drink. I'll get hold of myself. . . . I'm sorry."

So I went back to the living room and sat down. Things don't hit me in the pit of the stomach, instantly, the way they do some people. They seem to have to filter through my mind first. I say this to explain the fact that the news about Mary Louise had not really touched me yet. As I sat in Ethelyn's living room staring at the Picasso over her fireplace (those senseless-looking *saltimbanques*) I was aware mainly of a mild relief at knowing, finally, the reason for Ethelyn's extreme agitation.

Ethelyn was gone about fifteen minutes. I heard her blowing her nose, and then I heard her in the bathroom, and finally



she appeared, her face all blotchy, but composed now. She resumed her position on the couch, lit a cigarette, took a big drink out of her glass and said, "That was a shameful performance, and I'm sorry, Ruthie."

"That's all right. You'll feel better now. I know what a shock such a thing can be. I know how I felt the day I heard about her death."

"And this is worse. It couldn't be much worse, could it?" Then, after a short silence: "This is the first time I've cried. I'm shot. Just shot. I've been living on Seconal and whisky. That's not good." She laughed, and her laugh sounded like a silly giggle.

The thing that puzzled me right from the beginning and continued to puzzle me all that evening was this: Why was Ethelyn so absolutely devastated by the news about Mary Louise? I suppose you can assign degrees of horror to a death, but to me the most horrible thing was the simple fact that Mary Louise, at the age of thirty-nine, was dead. Ethelyn seemed completely thrown by the *cause* of her death. Of course, I thought, Bruce's being involved in the death may account for her greater concern over the cause—Bruce, Ethelyn's adored and only brother. And as she told me that night the rest of the story of Mary Louise and Bruce, I realized at once what I had always half suspected: that the relationship between Ethelyn and her brother was a strange one—not incestuous, certainly, but one of those strange sibling relationships one reads about.

Ethelyn poured more whisky into her glass and sat up straight. "I'll tell it all to you now, Ruthie, and try to keep the editorial comment to myself," she began. It seemed that Bruce and Mary Louise had never discontinued their wartime love affair. Naturally, with Bruce living in New York and Mary Louise in Boston, it had not been a hot and heavy, steady affair during all of those years. In fact, some years, according to Bruce, they had not seen each other at all. Those were the

years when Mary Louise would decide that she was going to try "to make a go of it" with Don. But it always became clear to her at the end of such a year that such a "go" was impossible. Then she would meet Bruce in New York for a weekend, and she would vow once more, promise cross-her-heart-and-hope-to-die that she would go straight home, ask Don for a divorce and make some sense, finally, out of her mixed-up life. But always she would go back to Boston and Don would have the flu, or she would agree to be programme chairman of the P.T.A. for the year or some such thing, and the clarification of her living arrangements would be once more postponed.

"Well, you can't keep on like that for all those years and not have your husband eventually find himself a little extra-curricular interest. Not that she ever told him. Or he told her. Not that they ever discussed it at all. They just stopped sleeping together sometime last spring according to Bruce." Then, abandoning her intention of keeping editorial comment to herself: "So dear little Mary Louise, in a burst of girlish enthusiasm after all these years, manages to get herself pregnant. Why, Ruthie? Why? Why would anyone be so damned dumb as to get themselves pregnant in a situation like that? And then go rushing right out to the nearest executioner and stick their head on the block. She could have left Don easily at that point. Why didn't she? Well, as usual, did she have to avoid the obvious solution? Ruthie, Bruce will never get over this. Never. And I blame her. I blame her from the beginning. I warned him. I pleaded with him. Oh, God, how I pleaded with him to leave her alone—well, you remember, at the lake. . . . Ruthie, that girl has always been murder. A silly little bitch. Didn't she ever hear about abortions? What did she think she was doing—having a tooth out? Didn't her mother ever tell her *anything*?"

I did not reply to Ethelyn's ravings. And after a while she calmed down, took another swallow of her drink, then sat

quietly, twisting a loose thread on the couch slipcover and staring straight ahead of her.

I cleared my throat and lit a cigarette. "Ethelyn," I said, "Mary Louise was as much a war casualty as Phil was. I think that's the answer to it all. Does that make sense to you?"

"No. Mary Louise was a bitch. A little-girl bitch. That's the worst kind. They know not what they do." The hysterics had passed completely: her voice was calm now, almost cold.

"She knew what she was doing. She knew right from wrong. That's why she couldn't have that child," I ventured.

"If she knew right from wrong, why didn't she do right, then?"

"She couldn't. That's my point. Suppose she had lost both her legs in the war. Would you ask why she couldn't walk? And yet she'd be aware of the fact that other people could walk, that there was such a thing as walking, that she used to be able to walk."

"I don't follow you," Ethelyn said coldly. "You're kidding yourself about Mary Louise. You know as well as I do that she was rotten. Charming and lovable but rotten."

"No she wasn't. I insist she wasn't. She was a victim of circumstances, the circumstances being the war. She was a war casualty."

"Circumstances, nuts! Who isn't a victim of circumstances? If she was a war casualty, then by God so am I!"

"Ethelyn, no. You keep deliberately missing my point. You can't just declare yourself a war casualty, with no scars, no wounds, no nothing to justify the claim. You might have been a casualty, yes. Phil's death would certainly have been cause enough. But you were strong enough to avoid being one. You're a successful woman, a successful human being by anyone's standards."

"Am I? How do you know?"

"Oh, for heaven's sakes, Ethelyn!" I was beginning to get annoyed with her. How quickly one can jump from concern

to annoyancel The assumption between us has always been that Ethelyn is more sensitive than I, more aware of the subtle nuance in a situation or a person, her skin thinner, her eyes sharper, her brain quicker. In college, Ethelyn was always the intellectual, the girl who could look beyond the petty details of the female world to the broader vistas of the male world. For the first time in our long friendship, this assumption seemed false to me. I saw Ethelyn's so-called subtlety as a form of obtuseness, actually, a kind of vanity that allowed her to utter half-truths, as long as they were well stated, a kind of pride that made her eager to pass judgment on others. Ethelyn loved to get away from actual facts, from concrete cases, to retreat to generalizations, impressionistic (and often unfair) characterizations, provocative paradoxes. I decided, since she seemed safely beyond her hysteria, to call her bluff, to bring her down to earth, to stop her, for her own sake, from indulging in rather dangerous dramatics.

"Look," I said. "Let's get this straight. You are not a war casualty because you were strong enough to rise above the circumstances of the war and emerge as a whole and successful woman. I am not a war casualty because I was lucky enough not to have had any very trying circumstances to rise above, and I believe I can pass for a reasonably well-adjusted human being. Mary Louise was a war casualty for two very simple reasons. One, if it hadn't been for the war she would never have married Don, never have become so hopelessly involved with Bruce. And two—and this is important—she's *dead*."

After a long silence (which I thought at first she was going to end by an angry outburst) Ethelyn said quietly, "You're right, Ruthie. I sometimes get myself mixed up with other people. I'm *not* Mary Louise. I mustn't forget that."

This remark surprised and baffled me. I had hoped my little speech would put a stop to her verbal pyrotechnics, but I certainly never expected to hear her say she mustn't confuse herself with Mary Louise. There were never two people more

radically different from each other, and their differences served not to attract but to antagonize. Oh, they were fond of each other, too—I've said the three of us were more intimate than most sisters. But Ethelyn, while she felt she understood Mary Louise, had scorn for the soft plasticity of her personality. Mary Louise never pretended to understand Ethelyn, but she was forever crying out against what she called her coldness, her heartlessness.

Mary Louise was one of those people who will sacrifice anything in life for love. I don't mean love in the sense of grand passion. I mean love in this sense: Mary Louise had to have everyone love her—streetcar conductors, teachers, bankers, nurses, everyone. She had no centre of her own, no beliefs, no values that could not be altered by someone whose love she needed. She would have entered a convent, a bordello, taken up archaeology, biochemistry, worked in a laundry, a knitting mill, become a Buddhist, a fascist, anything to collect this love she craved.

The craving was odd, too, since Mary Louise, just by *being*, seemed to attract love more than most people do. I've said she reminded me of a cocker spaniel. She had long wavy honey-coloured hair, suggesting the cocker spaniel ears. I suppose. She had those melting, trusting brown eyes. And she was small. Actually, outside of her hair and eyes, there was nothing very stunning about Mary Louise's looks. She was short and dumpy, always bulging a little someplace around the middle. Her legs were short and her ankles were thick, her hands were stubby and her fingernails as often as not were broken and ragged—not bitten, just neglected. The collars on her blouses always bore two or three ironing wrinkles. Her skirts were never on quite straight. Her shoes always needed attention, a little brushing or shining, or new heels. Yet of all the girls I knew in college, Mary Louise was not only the most popular but also the best loved. Loved in the same indulgent uncritical way that cocker spaniels are loved.

Why? I don't know. I always thought it was because she in turn loved everyone. But Ethelyn always insisted that Mary Louise never loved anyone but herself, was in fact incapable of loving any more deeply than, say, a cocker spaniel. But who is to say that a cocker spaniel's love is not a pure and rather wonderful kind of love?

I lived at our sorority house with Mary Louise spring quarter of our senior year, and I got to know her pretty well at that time. She used to have undesirables (goon boys, we used to call them) phone her for dates. And she would be so touched by their love? awe? admiration? that she would go all out in accepting the date. "Why, I'd love to, Jim. I think that sounds like the most exciting thing I've heard of in weeks!" Then always some desirable, some Chi Psi or Beta, would call, and she couldn't say no. She just couldn't say no to anyone. Then would follow a great and complicated attempt to amalgamate the two dates. She'd try to make a threesome of it. She'd try to make a party of it, ringing in three or four girls around the house and their assorted dates. Or she'd try to fit the two dates into the one evening. And, in the end, everyone would wind up exasperated with Mary Louise, but still loving her because she was such a lovable muddlehead, so disorganized and spontaneous—loving her because her eyes shone so brightly.

She even did this sort of thing with girls. I'd have a lunch date with her, say, to hash out ("in absolute privacy, Ruthie") her latest mess or hurt feelings or failure. Then, during the course of the morning, she would agree to have lunch with someone else. And this lunch was to have a totally different theme: to analyze each other's clothes, perhaps, or discuss a hair-dyeing project, or to read Edna St. Vincent Millay out loud. She would appear, then, with the third party—and as often as not there would be a fourth and a fifth and a sixth party involved by the time we actually sat down for lunch. And we would not talk about her latest mess, or about clothes or hair dyeing or Edna St. Vincent Millay. We would talk about some

sorority rushing intrigue or speculate on the sex life of a new psychology instructor. But as I've said, no one ever got mad at Mary Louise. How could you? It would have crushed her utterly for anyone to get mad at her. One just smiled and shrugged and said, "That's Mary Louise," and went on loving her for her enthusiasm, her sweetness, her kindness and her foibles.

Mary Louise herself had a sunny and forgiving disposition. Her black moods were completely private and consisted of an occasional day spent in bed with a touch of stomach flu, as she called it. One morning she would wake up with a queasy stomach, and she would spend that day lying on her bed sleeping, crying softly, taking doses of Kaopectate and sipping ginger ale. If you asked her about the tears, she would say, "I'm just desperate, that's all. Of all times to get sick—with three papers due next week and poor sweet Jim counting so on me going to the symphony with him tonight. I'm just at my wits' end again. Don't they have rest homes for people like me?"

Ethelyn said to her once, "They sure as hell do, honey," and stalked out of the room. Ethelyn was the only one who talked that way to Mary Louise. The rest of us saw through Mary Louise's Kaopectate Days (as Ethelyn called them), as clearly as Ethelyn did; but somehow they failed to irritate us the way they did Ethelyn. She was infuriated by the aimless, disorganized life Mary Louise led, and she was forever trying to get Mary Louise to make lists of her past-due obligations, clean her dresser drawers, get places on time, go to bed before 3 A.M., stop eating candy bars for breakfast. Mary Louise never understood Ethelyn's efforts to reform her. "Why doesn't she like me?" Mary Louise would cry in bewilderment. "I like her. I think she's marvellous. And I think I'm nice to her—aren't I always nice to her? But all she does is bawl me out and look at me with those cold, disapproving eyes. Tell me what she says about me. I've got to know why she doesn't like me."

Ethelyn of course, said nothing about Mary Louise that she hadn't already said directly to Mary Louise, so there was nothing we could tell Mary Louise that she would understand. Instead, we usually went to Ethelyn and urged her to apologize to Mary Louise who was "terribly hurt." The fact that Ethelyn always apologized indicated, I think, that she was truly fond of her, but her apologies were seldom tailored to Mary Louise's hurts. After the rest home business, for instance, Ethelyn went back later in the day and said to her, "Look, sweetie, all I meant by that mean remark was this: If you'd open your eyes and look at all the nasty things in the world once in a while, you wouldn't need a rest home." Mary Louise, of course, always accepted the apology, in whatever form it was offered.

What Ethelyn was referring to in that rest home business, I think, was Mary Louise's tendency to glamourize everything. I always felt that Mary Louise should have been a writer, because while she never really told lies, she never really told the truth either. For instance: if Mary Louise bought a new dress, it was "a pink whipped-cream dress, all smooth and billowy, a kind of cool sweet texture to it." And the dress would turn out to be just an ordinary pink-and-white checked gingham. If she went on a picnic (and I was with her on such picnics) she would tell the people the next day, "Oh, the air was like wine there on the cliff! And we sat and watched one of those religious-painting sunsets and ate gorgeous juicy hamburgers on fresh baked buns." Actually, hamburgers were served and we did eat on a cliff during the sunset hour; the rest was Mary Louise.

Ethelyn, on the other hand, would have mentioned the old beer cans on the cliff and the fact that nobody thought to bring salt. I always felt that Ethelyn's "truth" was almost as approximate as Mary Louise's. She seemed always to equate "truth" with unpleasantness. And of course an unpleasant observation about a person or place is not necessarily any more



accurate than a pleasant one. But truth, I suppose, is always approximate, and I'm sure "jesting Pilate" was quite right not to stay for an answer.

What I'm trying to point out, though, has nothing to do with truth; it has only to do with the radical difference between Mary Louise and Ethelyn, and my bafflement at Ethelyn's confusing herself, even for a moment, with Mary Louise. Yet all during the rest of that evening, Ethelyn swung back and forth between forgiving Mary Louise everything and weeping almost sentimental tears for her, and condemning her as violently as any seventeenth century cleric might have. It was the kind of wildly wavering judgment-passing that one reserves usually only for one's own thoughts and actions.

I don't know why it didn't occur to me until the next morning that Ethelyn was not confusing her *personality* with Mary Louise's personality: she was confusing her life, her *present situation*, with Mary Louise's tragic dilemma. It explained everything. No one, after all, is so affected by the death of a distant friend (even if that death is a suicide) that he works himself into hysterics. Bruce's involvement was limited to what Ethelyn had told me—tragic for Bruce, but certainly not devastating for Bruce's sister. No, Ethelyn's upset, both past (as described by Clarence) and present, had something to do with an illicit love affair. I was convinced of it.

Accordingly, over our second cup of coffee next morning I decided to give her an opening in case she wanted to tell me about it. There are some things that need to be told, need to be talked about, out loud to someone else. There are some things which, if left to fester in silence inside one, explode in irrevocable violent acts. It seemed to me that there could be no secret whose terror would not be lessened by exposure to morning sunlight and the eyes of a friend.

"You know, Ethelyn," I said, supposedly referring to Mary Louise again, "I'm romantic enough to believe that you can't help falling in love. It would be nice if at the beginning of

your life you could set up a nice neat timetable so that when the inevitable happened it would be at a time suitable to both of your lives. But it doesn't always work that way, does it?"

"Oh, I don't know," she replied. "Things usually work out for the best in the long run. Split this doughnut with me."

That was all she would say. And of course a pressured confession does no one (except possibly police officers) any good.



# *Part Two*



**A**S THAT LONG, long day wore on, Ethelyn's tension grew. Our talk became meaningless, false, frenetic again. It was as if someone had sentenced us to talk, to talk forever, without saying anything. Conversations I began about life, love, death, marriage, old friends, all of them Ethelyn ended with a thud, the thud of a truism or an unmistakable black period. Oh, that reminds me, I must call the laundry before I forget; or turn off the dripping faucet; or check on the smell of gas in the kitchen. She chewed her lips, picked at her fingernails, smoked continually. My hunch that Ethelyn was involved in an illicit love affair became a conviction. I gave her several additional opportunities during the morning to talk about it, but she turned them all down, quite deliberately.

She wouldn't even talk very sensibly about her work. At

one point, I expressed some surprise at hearing about her Ph.D. plans, and I asked her how she had happened to go into philosophy.

"I find philosophy more challenging than stenography," she replied.

"Well, what do you hope to do with it, Ethelyn? I mean, when you've finished your work, I suppose you plan to teach?"

"No. The ladies in the olden days worked samplers. If you think of it as a huge sampler, it's not so formidable."

Now, no one is that cynical about a project he himself has chosen, unless that project represents the only alternative to an unbearable despair. All at once, in a flash of insight I knew the source of Ethelyn's despair, the reason Clarence had wanted someone to stay with her during his absence, the explanation of her violent reaction to the *cause* of Mary Louise's death: Ethelyn herself must have had an abortion at one time, an abortion that had left her sterile. And now, in the middle of life, longing for a child but unable to conceive one, she must produce instead a Ph.D. a sampler, she called it. I decided to turn the conversation to children, and before many minutes had passed I was able to ask, quite naturally, if she and Clarence planned to have a family.

"No. We're too old," she replied.

"Have you tried everything?" I asked gently. "Because, if you have, I'm sure your chances for adopting would be excellent."

"Not necessarily. I don't think I'd get along very well with a social worker."

"Don't be silly. A trained social worker could see right through you—right through all your hard-sounding talk to the wonderful mother you'd be. Don't forget I lived with you for three months when you had Jennifer, and saw what kind of mother you can be."

When she didn't reply, I continued, "Really, Ethelyn, have you and Clarence seriously considered adoption?"

"What makes you think we'd have to adopt a child if we wanted a child?"

"Well, I somehow got that impression . . ."

"Well, your impression was wrong. The only thing we're too old for is getting up at two A.M. to heat bottles. And really, I can't imagine anything worse than spending my fifties in the middle of somebody's adolescence."

"Ethelyn, are you serious?"

"Of course I'm serious. If I woke up pregnant some morning, I think I'd be inclined to try Mary Louise's way out. But I won't wake up pregnant some morning, because I'm not the type to displace my diaphragm or forget when I had my last period."

After that, I began to lose patience, rapidly, with Ethelyn. My sympathy for her, in whatever plight she was in, dwindled. My hope that I could help her, that my visit might have some therapeutic value for her, began to disappear too. She really behaved abominably that day. Our talk disintegrated into a kind of frenzied chatter: clothes, gossip, television programmes. You might have thought I was the wife of one of Clarence's faculty acquaintances, or a mildly disliked second cousin, the way Ethelyn was behaving. Yes, she actually made me feel as if I were *sponging*, as if her duties consisted of providing clean linen, food and drink, and more or less a deal of polite chatter to fill the silences. She was discharging her hostess duties, nothing more. And it hurt me terribly. After all, Clarence had insisted I come, insisted she needed me. If she was really miserable, it hurt that she wouldn't talk to me, her oldest friend, about whatever was troubling her. And if she wasn't miserable, then I could only assume that my visit was really a terrible bore *and* chore for her. I began to think seriously about moving to Roy's hotel with him after dinner.

But toward the end of the afternoon I changed my mind. We were getting dressed to go to dinner with Roy. I had emerged from my shower and gone to the kitchen in search of



my cigarette lighter. There I found Ethelyn downing a glass of straight whisky, downing it as if it were medicine. For the first time, it occurred to me that Ethelyn might very well be an alcoholic.

She had certainly made a good start in that direction during the war. I thought of the night, just before we decided to move to the lake, when she almost set herself on fire. Alcoholism would explain her current behaviour certainly: her terrible nervousness, her little trips to the 'itchen (for the gas?), the bathroom (for the faucet?). It would explain her moodiness, the secretiveness I felt in her. And of course she would want me to leave. It must be hideous for an alcoholic to try to hide his disease.

Therefore, I made one final attempt: "Ethelyn, you're obviously very upset about something. Why don't you tell me what's getting you? You know you can trust me, and it might help to talk about it. *Whatever* it is."

This time she did not turn me off. "It won't help," she said. "Just forgive me, Ruthie. I'm being a real bitch, and this has been an awful day for you, I know."

"No. No. I don't mind at all. Really." And I didn't, suddenly. If the day had been a necessary prelude to something more meaningful, it was all right, then. "I just hate to see you so miserable," I continued. "I wish there were something I could do."

"There isn't. What has to be done only I can do."

"Ethelyn, tell me, please. I know I can help. You know Clarence has been very worried about you, don't you?"

She smiled what looked to me like a bitter little smile. "Yes, I know," she said. "But don't you start. Just bear with me. I'll be all right."

Roy arrived a little after five. Ethelyn was still dressing, and I let him in the front door.

"Well, you still in one piece?" he asked, kissing me. "Do you have any voice left?"

And even though I was so glad to see him I felt like crying, all I could say was: "Oh, yes." Suddenly, I felt completely drained, drained of words, feelings, even the energy to respond to another person. I realized then how tiring the day had really been. All I wanted to do now was go outside, breathe fresh air, be silent, soothe my nerves with banal sights and sounds: watch women pushing baby carriages, look into the windows of bakeries and fruit stands, listen to the sound of buses. Just be normal. Ordinary. Instead, I must start all over, tell Roy about Mary Louise, try to tell him right now, while I had time alone with him, about Ethelyn's state of mind. Because Ethelyn, hard, glittery, opinionated, is the kind of woman that rubs Roy the wrong way. Ordinarily with such a woman he assumes a mildly insulting kind of superiority, and his conversation becomes patronizing banter. He usually goes too far with the banter, and the woman usually becomes openly irritated, and I have to attract his attention and give him a furious jab with my eyes. Then he lapses into sulky silence, agreeing politely with whatever the woman has to say. I wanted to tell him right away to be as agreeable as he could be, to make allowances for everything—both for Ethelyn's sake and for mine. I knew she wouldn't be able to stand any more tension.

He looked at me closely. "Have you been having fun, honey?"

I felt like throwing my arms around him, crying a little bit, telling him everything that had happened. I wanted to go away from that apartment with Roy—just the two of us. I hadn't needed him so desperately, felt so close to him, in months. But all I said was: "Of course. It's been wonderful. But I'm exhausted."

"So am I," Ethelyn called unexpectedly from the bedroom. "Roy, why don't you fix us a drink before we go?" She emerged from the bedroom, carrying her manicure equipment and ear-

rings. "I'll finish up in here," she said. And with that, the opportunity for a briefing session passed.

Roy made martinis, and Ethelyn seemed resolved to turn over a new leaf. She was pleasant, talkative without being shrill, very agreeable.

"This is an awfully good martini, Roy," she said, sipping her drink, while she held out one hand for her nail polish to dry. "I have a new validity test for men: Do children like him? Do dogs like him? Does he make a good martini?"

"Oh, that won't hold up," I said. "I can think of two—no, three—very good men who make terrible martinis. Henry Lundgren next door to us at home. He puts them in quart jars in the refrigerator! And Roy's boss, Joe Ashbaugh. And Dad. Dad makes the worst ones, doesn't he, honey?"

"Pretty bad," Roy admitted.

"Does he put onions in them?" Ethelyn asked.

"Yes. And he uses sherry. Some real cheap grocery store sherry. I don't understand it."

"Onions, though. That's the real sin. Whatever name you want to give it, if it has an onion in it, it's a sin."

Ethelyn was trying very hard to be sociable, and I admired her for it. But the tension was still there. I have noticed lately that talking about martinis is some kind of social symptom, like talking about the weather. You can tell people are nervous and don't know what to say when they talk about martinis or the weather. A rather witty remark to that effect occurred to me, and I said, "Everybody talks about martinis, but nobody does anything about them."

I expected them to laugh. I expected the conversation to move then to a less sterile subject. But the remark seemed to kill the conversation altogether. So I added lamely, "Honey, you didn't give Ethelyn an olive."

"What?" Roy said.

"You didn't give Ethelyn an olive. Or did you eat yours, Ethelyn?"

Ethelyn waved her wet nails in the air for a moment. "I ate mine," she said. "I guess I'm hungry. Where are we going to eat?"

"Anywhere you say."

"Let's go someplace French and dim."

Roy grimaced unpleasantly. "Snails?"

"No. Not snails. Don't be so predictably male. I suppose you were thinking of Harry's."

"As a matter of fact, I *was* thinking of Harry's."

I began to get a little nervous. I tried to catch Roy's eye to get some kind of signal through to him. But unexpectedly Ethelyn laughed. "All right. Harry's it is." She turned to me. "Harry's is steak. And I think that's what you and I, at least, need about now."

It turned out Ethelyn was referring to our rather skimpy meals of the past twenty-four hours, but I thought she was referring to the whole exhausting ordeal we had been through. I sighed. "Yes. I suppose we had better tell Roy all about it, although I kind of hate to go through it all again."

"What?" Roy asked, and he put down his drink and took a long drag on his cigarette. "What have I missed?"

I sighed again. "Well, we haven't just been talking about new hats and things. I mean, if we both seem sort of nervous and exhausted—"

"Excuse me," Ethelyn said. "I've heard this." She laughed harshly, lit a cigarette and retired to the bathroom.

"It's upset her terribly," I whispered, as soon as she was out of the room. "Do try to be nice to her, darling, even if she acts nasty. She's in some kind of trouble, I think."

He frowned, nodded, then said out loud, "Well, what was Bruce's story on Mary Louise?"

I told him about Mary Louise then, making the story as brief as I could.

When Ethelyn returned to the room I had finished the story. She looked upset again. "Are there any dividends in the

pitcher, Roy?" I asked. Ethelyn held out her glass, and I noticed that her hand was shaking badly. "Another olive? Maybe Ethelyn would like another olive, darling."

"No," Ethelyn snapped at me.

"That's quite a story," Roy said, to break the little silence that followed her "no." "She certainly was a mixed-up little kid."

Ethelyn said nothing. She just sat in her chair, sipping her drink and staring at the rug. So I said, "I told Ethelyn I thought Mary Louise was a war casualty. Don't you think that makes some sense, Roy?"

Ethelyn looked up now. She seemed not to have heard me speak, because she spoke directly to Roy. "Where do you get that 'mixed-up little kid' business, Roy? Mary Louise was thirty-nine years old."

"I know. You can still be a mixed-up little kid at thirty-nine."

"Oh? And how do you tell mixed up little thirty-nine-year-olds from little thirty-nine year-olds who aren't mixed up?"

Thank heaven I had been able to brief Roy a bit on Ethelyn. I could see, looming on the horizon, just the sort of scene I was afraid of. Now I caught his eye and narrowed my own eyes slightly in warning. Don't, please don't, argue with her, I signalled.

But Roy ignored my signal. "It would be nice if we could apply a simple litmus paper test."

"I thought perhaps you had such a test, and you might tell us about it."

"No, I haven't. I have only my opinion—which is, admittedly, only one man's opinion. But I've always thought Mary Louise was a mixed up little kid. Haven't I, Ruthie?"

"Yes. Even though I never felt you really got to know her. But anyhow, Ethelyn, Roy is saying, really, pretty much what you were saying last night, you know. In just a little different words."

"Oh, he is not!" Ethelyn said. Then she stood up, lit another cigarette and said, "Let's for God's sake quit talking about mixed-up little thirty-nine-year-olds. Roy, here, is the only one who isn't thirty-nine. In fact, let's go eat." Then she laughed, as if it had all been a great big joke and her rudeness merely part of the gag.

Harry's was too crowded, and we went, after all, to a dim place with French food and started off with oysters. Ethelyn turned charming suddenly, and Roy, evidently recalling my briefing session at last, was lovely to her. He can be so charming when he wants to be. If he only realized how his public charm always enhances my private love for him, he would always be this way. The exhaustion, the awful drained feeling was leaving me. Roy and Ethelyn were both wonderfully gay all during dinner. And the martinis, the excellent food, the never ending pleasure I take in looking at and speculating about strangers (in this case, the other diners) were all contributing to a fine feeling of relaxation and enjoyment.

But beneath Ethelyn's gaiety her nervousness was still very apparent. She fidgeted with everything: cigarettes, matchbooks, the cellophane from her cigarette package, the silverware, her bracelet, her fingers. Although she had said she was hungry, she ate very little. Finally, Roy reached over and took the cellophane she was fidgeting away from her. "Look, lady, relax, will you? You're not Mary Louise, and nothing's going to bite you." I thought this was very astute of Roy, even touching in a way. But I could see by Ethelyn's face that she was not touched, that she, in fact, would work herself up into another savage outburst in a moment if I didn't act quickly. So I said, "Look. I've had to go to the little girls' room for the last half hour. Where is it, Ethelyn? Let's go powder our noses while Roy orders us some brandy. Don't you think we need brandy, darling?"

"Sure. By all means," Roy replied.

And Ethelyn said, "The little girls' room is 'way to the back and up those stairs. I don't have to go."

The damage was done, of course, during the few minutes I was gone, for when I returned Roy was sitting in familiar sulky silence. Ethelyn's cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were bright. She was saying, "My God, what do you call drama? Do you have to have the San Francisco earthquake and Ben Hur thrown in before you'll call it drama?"

Roy stood up when I approached

Ethelyn said, "I'm sorry. I seem to be fighting with your husband. He thinks I dramatize things."

"Oh, nonsense," I said. "He always thinks things like that."

Roy ignored me and continued to talk to Ethelyn. "You do dramatize things, and this situation doesn't merit the full scale production you're giving it."

"What situation?" I asked, more to slow him down than anything else.

"What situation do you think?" Ethelyn spat at me.

"No, listen, Ethelyn," Roy went on. "Everything in life can be dramatic. Don't forget, the essence of drama is that it's *made*. Events selected, pointed up, accentuated, exaggerated. Hell, you can make drama out of the death of . . . of an alley cat."

"Oh, Jesus! What a happy example! What a happy choice of words!" Ethelyn cried.

"Now, look," I said firmly. "I think we ought to drop this whole subject right now. Ethelyn, you *are* dramatizing it. I know it's really affecting you more deeply in some ways than it is me. But I still think you've got to get hold of yourself and stop brooding. And Roy, I think you are being extremely rude." That's all I said to him, but he could tell by the look I gave him how annoyed with him I had become.

Ethelyn sighed, shrugged and finally smiled. "I'm sorry, Ruthie. Once again, I'm sorry. I hope I won't have to say it

again." She glanced at Roy, and I could tell she was waiting for something.

"It seems to me you have an apology coming too, Ethelyn," I said, directing a level glance at Roy.

"Yes," he said at last, and he smiled across at Ethelyn and held out his hand.

But she didn't take it. She just said quietly, "It's all right, Roy."

After dinner we went to a movie. It was my idea, and although neither Roy nor Ethelyn showed much enthusiasm beforehand, it turned out to be exactly what all of us needed. It was a wonderful old Danny Kaye movie, and we emerged from it refreshed. Ethelyn's tension seemed to have disappeared almost completely, and Roy's good mood had returned. And the long ride back to the South Side in the cab and the nightcap in Ethelyn's apartment were pleasant and relaxed. Ethelyn made Roy a second nightcap, but she took none herself. And all my speculations and theories about Ethelyn began to seem very unreal.

Ethelyn and I made plans to go shopping and have lunch at Marshall Field's the next day. I wanted to find some sort of interesting top to go with my black velvet skirt for the holidays. And something a little unusual for Mother for Christmas. And of course I wanted to visit Field's toy department. Ethelyn said she had some shoes to return, and she wanted to look at lamps. Roy kidded us about tea room food and gooey desserts, and all in all things seemed somehow to have become normal at last. After Roy left, Ethelyn put a Danny Kaye record on her record player, and we made ourselves cheese sandwiches and sat until after two, chatting about my children, about Clarence, about the summer she and Mary Louise and I had lived at the lake.

"Ruthie," Ethelyn said at one point. "Remember Jerry Gates? Your captain?"

"Of course!" I felt my cheeks redden a little.



"I saw him a few weeks ago. On Michigan Avenue."

"For heaven's sake! What's he doing now? Does he live here?"

"He not only lives here, he's still carrying on his tragic love affair with Chicago." She mentioned the name of the newspaper where he worked, and laughed. "He claims it's even more scandalous than I think it is. I very day is a hideous compromise with his integrity."

"Poor Jerry. He was funny."

We stared past each other for a minute, smiling nostalgically and remembering those long ago days."

"What made me think of him," Ethelyn said at last, "was your skin. Remember how he used to call you Post Toasties? You haven't changed a bit since those days, Ruthie. How do you do it?"

I decided before I went to sleep there wasn't a thing in the world wrong with Ethelyn. I had come looking for trouble (at Clarence's suggestion) and I had, of course, found it. You always find trouble when you look for it, because, actually, it's always there, like germs, just waiting to be activated.

Objectively now, I asked myself, on what was I basing my alarm about Ethelyn's drinking. She had always, since college days, drunk more than any of the rest of us. It went along with her high strung nature, the way her migraines did. Tears? Ethelyn's emotions have always been closer to the surface than mine have. Why shouldn't she, given her temperament, cry and swear and carry on over the death, in very unsavoury circumstances, of a very dear friend? Her disgraceful outbursts, first with me, then with Royce. Had Ethelyn, I asked myself, ever been able to discuss a controversial subject without turning it into a full scale argument? No. And I thought of all the rushing meetings in college where she invariably stood up for the girl we were about to blackball, invariably attacked the girl we all favoured. And what about her tension,

her nervousness, her silly chatter, the surreptitious drink in the kitchen? I realized then, almost blushing in the dark, that I may well have been the cause of all those things. I had been treating Ethelyn like an invalid, an invalid or a suspect of some kind, and she had responded quite naturally with the petulance of the invalid, the false naturalness of the suspect. Roy had come along with no preconceptions about Ethelyn's state, allowed her her tantrums, argued openly with her, treated her like a normal, healthy individual, and the air had miraculously cleared for all of us.

I'll say this in my favour, however. Even at best, being a house guest or a hostess is one of the most exhausting, trying and exacting activities in the world. If only during visits or vacations, one didn't feel it necessary to suspend temporarily, one's everyday life. Who in the world can spend an entire week, or even day, looking and feeling? To try to absorb in one day a view of the ocean, for instance, the interior of a seventeenth-century house, a gallery of priceless pictures, is to miss everything in the end. What good is a view of the ocean unless one views it every day for many, many days out of the corner of one's eye? While hanging clothes, setting the table, picking up toys from the porch. Who can tell what a house is like unless one lives in it? Knows its midale of the night creaks, becomes familiar with the generic patterns made by doors, window frames, light coming through drawn bedroom shades? And pictures in galleries, museums of my kind—they are the worst of all. They make me sigh, to say make me tired right down to my elbows and navel. Yes, that was the feeling, the exhaustion I had felt all day, the same kind of fatigue that comes over me in a museum. Just as in a museum one wanders, without interest finally, from gallery to gallery, unable to stop looking at pictures and objects, so as a house guest (or a hostess) one feels compelled to go on talking and talking, far beyond one's wish to talk, far beyond the limits of natural conversation.

That's what I had been forcing Ethelyn to do, I decided. Certainly Ethelyn had troubles, but they were not mine, and, as she had said, I could not help her with them. In the final analysis, to try to help a person with his private troubles is one of the most futile occupations in the world. Unless, of course, you are a priest or an analyst.

In spite of the fact that it must have been three o'clock before I went to sleep, I woke up the next morning at eight-thirty. I felt rested. The numbness I spoke of earlier had disappeared the night Roy and I had had our little fight and reconciliation, and now the vague uneasiness that always accompanies me on a trip was gone too. I looked out the window. It was a perfect day for Christmas shopping—mild, soft grey, quietly snowing. I watched a man below in the street, brushing the snow off his car, and suddenly I felt wonderful. Really ecstatic! I wanted a big breakfast, lots of hot coffee, a warm shower. The day stretched before me like one of those golden days in childhood—maybe the first day of summer vacation with a swimming picnic planned for the afternoon. Ethelyn must still be asleep. I decided, but that was no reason why I couldn't get up, tiptoe into the kitchen, make some coffee and enjoy a few minutes or even hours of this delicious mood in solitude. I found myself almost wishing for a whole day of solitude—just to enjoy my new found self or sense of being alive or whatever it was. It is sometimes dangerous to trust this kind of fragile, precious mood to another person. I say all this to explain the guilty joy I felt when Ethelyn told me, that morning, she had a migraine.

She heard me in the bathroom, of course, and called from her bedroom: "Ruthie, come in here a minute please." She was lying in her darkened room. "Sweetie, I'm devastated. I have one of my damned heads."

"Oh, Ethelyn! I'm sorry!"

"If I'm awake, I can tell when one's coming and head it off with a little white pill. But this one! If you wake up with one,

that's it. Darling, go shopping anyhow. I'll be lousy company today."

"I wouldn't think of it," I said, already knowing that I would let her talk me into going, already feeling guilty because of the pleasure the thought of spending the day alone gave me. "Tell me what I can do for you. What can I get you?"

"Nothing. There's absolutely nothing you can do or get for me. You just sweat out a migraine. I'll be all right by evening, I think."

I looked at her almost tenderly. "How about some coffee?"

"Oooo no! I couldn't keep it down. Thanks anyhow. You just run ~~around~~ <sup>around</sup> and find what you can. There's orange juice in the refrigerator --and English muffins, I think."

"Darling, don't trouble your head. I'll find it all."

"I'm so sorry, Ruthie. God, I'm an awful hostess."

"You're not, either. You're wonderful."

"You will go shopping, won't you?"

I looked at her lying on her bed, so obviously in anguish, still trying to be the hostess. "I'll go if you really want me to. If you're sure there's nothing I can do here to help you." And I really meant it. In the light of my new insights about being a house guest or a hostess I would have gone shopping even if I hadn't wanted to, just to give poor Ethelyn a chance to recover from her headache in quiet and solitude.

"I do want you to go. I'd feel much better about everything if you did."

"All right," I said.

"Sweetie, there's some orange juice and English muffins in the refrigerator."

"I know. You told me. I'll fix myself a lovely breakfast. And don't you worry about anything. I'll find everything."

I did find everything, everything except the coffee. I looked high and low for it, in cupboards, drawers, even in the refrigerator. But I had to return to Ethelyn's room. "I've found

everything but the coffee. I suppose it's right in front of my nose, but I can't see it"

I realized then that she was crying. All of my qualms of the day before returned. "What is it, Ethelyn?"

It took her a minute to reply. "It's my head that's all. These things are murder."

"Are you sure that's all?"

"Yes," she snapped. Then after a pause: "Oh. The coffee. It's in a can marked 'English tea biscuit.' A cute little square can in the cupboard over the stove. I've been going to paint that can for two years now to match my canister set. You can see what a busy life I lead."

I decided to stick to the policy I had formed the night before: stay out of other people's troubles. I tried a little laugh. "You know, you'll never paint that can. I have a lovely little tea can with a blue Japanese scene on it. I keep nuts in it for baking. I've been going to paint it for years and years. But now I have nuts and Fujiyama so mixed up that I don't want to."

The decision to stick to my policy was rewarded. She wiped her eyes and laughed. 'Bath salts in potato chip cans, too. Someday we're going to wind up confused, Ruthie. Real confused."

We both laughed then. And she said, "Oh, God, it jiggles my head when I laugh."

"Poor Ethelyn. Go to sleep. I have everything I need now. We'll finish laughing tonight "

She nodded, smiled and turned over, and I knew I'd said the right thing. When I left the apartment, about ten-thirty, Ethelyn was asleep, and the last of my guilt feelings about leaving her vanished.

It was still snowing outdoors, large wet flakes that piled up on walls, on car tops, on garbage can lids, but turned to brown, deep slush in the streets. It was windless, almost warm,

and the large perfect snowflakes, drifting lazily, aimlessly, seemed out of place in the city. Snow in a city should be driven by sharp, biting winds, should be small sleety flakes that disappear, without explanation or reason, into the concrete spaces. I felt unreal walking through that country snow-storm in the city, unreal but full of elation.

Have you ever noticed how another's illness makes you feel healthy? Or, for that matter, have you ever noticed how virtuous you feel after encountering an unhappy rich man or a beautiful woman who has been deserted? Or what a serene and adequate parent you become after an interval with a harassed mother? According to Roy, this is called spiritual pride and is something to be avoided as assiduously as greed, sloth or lust. At times I have made quite innocent remarks to Roy: "The poor Lundgrens always have colds, don't they? It certainly can't be the weather-- or else we've been terribly lucky this year." Or, "I can't think why Martha wasn't prepared for just this kind of trouble-- taking a job with two preschoolers in the family." From all such remarks Roy recoils in almost superstitious horror. Once he said to me, "I here is an eleventh commandment that Moses didn't have time to take down: 'Thou shalt not rejoice in thy neighbours' misfortunes.'" It did no good to explain to him that I was *not* rejoicing in my neighbours' misfortunes, I was simply commenting on a given state of affairs. But that morning, walking through the snow-storm, I discovered what he meant.

The thought of poor Ethelyn lying inside in the darkness, her head splitting, made me feel even stronger, more vital, more full of energy than I had felt on awakening. How nice, I thought, not to be troubled by headaches! How nice to know what I want, to have what I want, instead of forever writhing in some kind of vague torment, the way Ethelyn did.

I walked the five blocks to the IC station, breathing deeply, swinging my arms, feeling good about everything in my life. I thought of all the wonderful winters of my childhood, and I

had to restrain myself from gathering up a handful of wet snow and packing a firm and satisfactory snowball and aiming it at a street lamp. I actually had to restrain myself from walking through the deepest slush just to feel the joy of its resistance against my feet. A peculiarly childlike joy, akin to mudpies and puddles. I am thirty-nine years old, after all, I said to myself. But I said it fondly; I didn't really believe it.

All of which would have been perfectly all right if I hadn't also been so proud of myself, and happy in some funny kind of way about Ethelyn's headache and unhappiness. There is a proverb to describe this classic situation: "Pride goeth before a fall." I fell—literally. I had bought my ticket, climbed the steps, walked down the long bare platform to the waiting room, before I realized that I was on the "From City" instead of the "To City" side. I could see a train approaching far down the tracks, and I started to run. It was undoubtedly the train I wanted; I would have to wait fifteen minutes if I missed it; and I felt like running. It's permissible, after all, for a thirty-nine-year-old woman to run for a train. So I ran—back along the platform and down the steps. I had nearly reached the bottom when something happened. I turned my ankle, slipped in a puddle, I don't know: down I went in a staggering, sprawling fall. I tore one stocking at the knee, got muddy water on my coat and my purse.

A distinguished-looking elderly gentleman helped me to my feet. "Take it easy, young lady," he said. "Are you hurt?"

I wasn't hurt. I was furious. Furious and embarrassed. And I forced an embarrassed little laugh. "No. I'm all right. Thank you."

He took out a big white handkerchief and began to wipe muddy water off my coat. I felt like crying now. I felt that it was somehow improper for this man (who looked like one of those men in cartoons who give jewelry to their bosomy secretaries) to be wiping the mud off my coat. But I was helpless to stop him. All my fine poise, my anticipation of a good day, my

elation, had vanished with that fall, and I stood there like a little child, letting him wipe the mud off my coat, then off my purse. I heard a train clatter by overhead and I sighed. "I missed my train after all," I said.

"That wasn't your train. That was an express. Are you going to the Loop?"

"Yes."

"Your train will be along in about five minutes," he said. He handed me my purse. "There you are. All set now. You're going to the Loop? Go up those stairs." He took my arm, ostensibly to turn me around and show me which stairs he meant, but before he released my arm he gave it a familiar little squeeze.

"Thank you very much," I said in confusion, and I turned to go.

He winked at me and smiled knowingly. "Take it easy, young lady. Remember, haste makes waste."

Up the 'To City' stairs I ran then, my cheeks hot, my heart beating too fast. I felt humiliated, completely deflated and a little frightened. Why had he called me "young lady," squeezed my arm, winked? Because I had abandoned my dignity, that's why. Because I had been floating along on feelings suitable for a 'young lady,' or another kind of lady who wouldn't mind being squeezed or winked at. I had been gloating, and fate had to slap me down. Yes, I had been gloating over Mary Louise and Ethelyn. Something like this: I, Ruthie, seem to have turned out rather well. Of the three of us, I certainly have managed my life the best. Character, yes, character and a good upbringing, and good health and energy, and luck, too, of course. But still, I, Ruthie, seem to have turned out rather well. Oh, I despised myself, standing there on the IC platform, waiting for the train, my stockings a mess, my cheeks burning. I would have liked to return to Ethelyn's apartment, abandon the shopping expedition for the day. All the joy, the zest I had felt earlier was gone. But to spend the day brooding



indoors, with an ailing Ethelyn for company (and of course she'd feel compelled to get up and act like a hostess, even if her head were still splitting), was a less beguiling prospect. I'll buy a new pair of stockings at Field's, first thing, I decided, pull myself together in the ladies' room and start over fresh. And I'll have something with hot fudge sauce and whipped cream for lunch.

By the time I reached the Loop, however, I could no longer ignore my ankle. I hadn't been aware of twisting my ankle in the fall. But unless the hurt is something major, one is seldom aware, right after a fall, of any specific sensations. I had just felt generally unstrung and uncomfortable, and it wasn't until I stood up to get off the train that I realized my right ankle hurt. When I went to put on fresh stockings I could see that it was beginning to swell. Still, the pain was not excruciating enough nor the swelling extreme enough for me to change my plans. I combed my hair, put on fresh lipstick, smoked a cigarette; then I took a deep breath, so to speak, and went out into the glitter of the store.

But I couldn't seem to get in a shopping mood. The crowds were irksome and confusing. The lights in the store seemed too bright. All the jeweled cashmeres and dressy blouses looked alike. I kept encountering items I had seen at Chandler's in St. Paul. And suddenly it all seemed foolish and useless, and all I could think about was my painful ankle.

All right, then, I decided, I'll go back to the apartment and spend the afternoon with a heating pad. Evidently I was not destined to have fun on this trip. Scenes and tears and tension, a completely nerve-racking and unsatisfactory forty-eight hours! And just as I had emerged from the nightmarish tunnel into the light of day again I had had to fall down, destroying first my emotional well-being and now my physical well-being. I sighed. I'll write off the trip—the whole Chicago trip—as a total failure. Then I remembered: I had come to help Ethelyn, after all. I had known at the start that the visit might

very well be a trying one. If I had been any help at all to her, then I had no reason to count the trip a failure. And if I hadn't, if she had had no real need of me, if Clarence's call had been completely ill-advised . . .

Suddenly it came over me, like an unexpected draft from an open door, that my high spirits, my fall, my ankle, my decision to return to the apartment were all part of a preordained pattern. Something was pushing me, in spite of myself, back to the apartment. I should never have left Ethelyn alone; something was wrong. I felt a terrible urgency to get back there—quickly, quickly—to prove to myself that nothing was wrong, or to— But what silliness! Every mother that ever lived must know this feeling. A sudden wave of panic in the middle of a movie, a compulsion to get up and leave, to return home at once: to stop the maniacal baby sitter, to quench the fire, to minister to the child with the raging fever. Always, of course, one fights the urgency as a kind of insanity, sits through the movie, and returns to find the baby sitter quietly reading, the house peaceful, the children's foreheads quite cool.

I fought this present urgency. I fought the desire to take a cab all the way from the Loop. If I take a cab. I thought in my temporary insanity, I will find what I am afraid of. So I bought some tape for my ankle, and I bought an assortment of magazines and some French pastry. And I limped slowly back to the IC station. The snow had turned to a nasty cold rain. The policemen's whistles (the peculiar Chicago kind) sounded mournful as loons. Everything looked dirty and grey and shoddy. Everyone looked tired and cold and afraid. And the panic was growing in me as uncontrollably as nausea.

I took a cab from the IC station to Ethelyn's apartment, and it must have been a little after one by that time. I rang the bell—a long, hard ring, in case she was asleep. No answer. I rang again, my hand shaking now. No answer. Then my eye fell on a bell marked "Superintendent." Of course. I'll ring his bell, tell him Mrs. Campbell is ill, have him let me into

the apartment. But just then the buzzer sounded, I opened the door and hobbled hurriedly, grotesquely, up the two flights of stairs to Ethelyn's apartment.

Ethelyn opened the door for me. She was fully dressed, her hair combed, her makeup in place. "My Lord, are you back already?"

There it was. There it was: the reading baby sitter, the quiet house, the cool forehead. My relief was so immense that it must have shown on my face, because Ethelyn said, "Ruthie, what's the matter?"

I sighed a deep sigh and laughed. "I hurt my ankle," I said. "I fell down the steps at the IC station and hurt my ankle."

"Well, is that so funny?"

"No. I guess I was just relieved that—"

Then I saw Roy.

He came out of the living room, a highball in his hand. "Hi, honey. What happened?"

"Well, for heaven's sake! Where did you come from?"

"I just dropped by to see if I could horn in on your lunch. What happened to you?"

"I twisted my ankle. I don't think it's sprained, but it got to hurting so much I couldn't shop." But I was puzzled, and a little worried. "I thought this was your day with the S.S.T.L. people. It didn't all fall through, did it?"

"No. No. I'll tell you all about it. Just the lunch postponed. Which left me nothing to do for lunch, so I thought I'd try to catch you gals. Take you to Harry's." He grinned.

I was still puzzled. It didn't sound like the kind of thing Roy would do, given a postponed lunch date. But there was nothing else I could say except: "Well, fine." Then: "Ethelyn had a headache, so I went shopping by myself, and then this happened." But that was a silly thing to say. Ethelyn must already have explained that to him.

"When Roy showed up in search of food and drink, I de-

cided what the hell. Maybe I'd feel better if I got up and put some clothes on and had a drink with him," Ethelyn said.

We were all standing in the foyer of the apartment, and I had the feeling that we were in the first act of a second-rate play, where the characters stand around trying to work the circumstances of their entire lives into the conversation.

"For heaven's sake, let's sit down," I said. "This ankle is really killing me."

Roy swept me off my feet then and deposited me on the couch in the living room.

I laughed. "Well! How many have you had?"

"Two," he said. "And one more coming up. We have to keep you company, and a drink is just what your ankle needs."

"I wouldn't say it was just what you needed. Are you through for the day?"

"Officially. Until tomorrow morning."

"Well, all right. But I really don't care for a drink, anyhow."

He was already mixing three highballs, however, and he handed me mine with no comment.

"I'm really more hungry than anything," I said. "How's your head, Ethelyn?"

"Better, I guess. A little better."

That was it. None of us could think of anything more to say. And I suppose it was then it first occurred to me that I had interrupted some kind of important conversation. But this was a familiar feeling to me—to everyone, probably. If you are a certain kind of person, and you join a group, and the conversation seems to lag, you assume that your presence has muffled it. Yet, as with the premonition-of-disaster feeling, you soon learn through repeated tests and proofs that usually this is not the case. The feeling is more a fear, born of a general distrust of life. And so I ignored the feeling.

Roy put some Mozart on the record player. "And now I'm going to fix some lunch for you two invalids."

I thought Ethelyn would protest, or would at least get up to help him, but she remained seated in her chair, lethargic, detached, her cold glass pressed against her forehead.

"Darling, your head is killing you, isn't it? Why don't you go lie down?" I said.

"It's all right," she replied, hardly moving her lips.

"Of all days for Roy to decide to be clabby. You know, he'd never do this again in a million years. Men are so funny."

She nodded. We said nothing more, letting the music fill the silence for us. I could hear Roy banging around in the kitchen, and I had an impulse to get up and go help him. But such an action would have forced Ethelyn to her feet too. Besides my ankle was really very painful. I wonder if he's finding everything or if he's making a mess out there,' I said.

She didn't answer.

Suddenly I remembered the coffee. "Roy," I called.

"What?" from the kitchen.

"Ethelyn keeps her coffee in a little square can marked 'English tea biscuits' in the cupboard over the stove."

He didn't answer.

"I wish you'd make coffee. I feel like a nice cup of coffee."

But even as I spoke the wonderful fragrance of percolating coffee escaped from the kitchen and drifted tantalizingly into the living room.

Oh, I make it sound like a Sherlock Holmes story! I make it sound as if I were one of those marvellously observant and logical detectives in the funny papers. I smelled the coffee. How did he know where the coffee was kept when I had had such a difficult time finding it that very morning? Then, ergo! Like some IBM machine my mind begins to drop things into proper slots, and when the clicking stops, there it is: the correct solution, neat, accurate and irrefutable. It wasn't like that, believe me. Those detectives never think they're going insane, do they? I'm sure they don't.

And when it first occurred to me that Roy and Ethelyn were in love, or at least involved in some kind of affair, I thought I was going insane. How did he find the coffee? Then: why did he come here this afternoon, anyhow? And why did it take them so long to answer the door? My heart began to beat a little faster. My jaws felt funny. Don't be silly, I said to myself. You and your premonitions, you and your hunches—have they ever been right? Do you think you're psychic? The next thing, you'll be accusing people of following you, of hiding under your bed. Do you call out accusations, based on hysterical fears, like some silly high school girl or nervous old maid? But it would explain everything, everything inexplicable. I began to perspire in that cold way one does just before vomiting.

I excused myself, went to the bathroom, sat down on the closed toilet seat and put my head in my hands. It would explain everything, yes. Roy's reluctance for me to come to Chicago, Ethelyn's hesitations, the malaise Clarence had been concerned about, her peculiar behaviour with me. Oh, God, imagine having to spend hours and hours in intimate conversation with the wife of your lover! Of course it wouldn't help to tell *me* about her troubles. And what about the scene in the restaurant? Roy and Ethelyn didn't—shouldn't—know each other well enough to have such an unabashed quarrel. And the olives, the olives, the olives! Of course Roy didn't give her an olive. She didn't like olives. What a slip that was! And there were others. I was sure there were others if only I could think of them. I think hard. I try to think of some others. But my mind refused to function any more, and all I could think of was the olives. And a silly song that had been careering senselessly through my head, ever since breakfast, continued on its merry way. "Tweedley, tweedley, tweedley, dee. I'm as happy as can be. Goodness gracious lollypop . . ." That's all I knew of it.

I flushed the toilet to cover the silence in the bathroom. I

held my wrists under the cold-water faucet for a minute. I spoke sharply to myself. Now stop it! On the basis of two or three odd little occurrences—circumstantial evidence, it's called—are you going to go in there and make accusations and carry on like some witch-hunter? I tried out a few tentative openers: "Why don't you tell me just exactly what's going on? It would be much simpler for all of us, you know." I could see their surprised faces—their dumfounded faces! "Honey, what's the matter? Have you gone out of your mind?" "No," I would say, and I would present my evidence. And they would look at each other, in genuine alarm, over my head. Or Ethelyn would get quite justifiably angry. "If you think I could do anything that low, I'm afraid you'd better leave right now, Ruthie."

And there I would sit, in the puddle of my humiliation—the unmasked witch-hunter.

Oh, God, why is there always pride to stop us from finding out the things we most want to know? Do you love her? Do you love him? How much will it hurt? How much will it cost? Why have I failed? But who can ask these questions without giving away, permanently, a part of himself—herself—forever? And oh, the evasive answers one gets, even having paid the price demanded!

"Ruthie! What's the matter? Are you sick in there?" It was Ethelyn.

I cleared my throat quietly. "I'm all right. I'll be out in a second." My voice sounded surprisingly ordinary to my ears.

Then all at once I knew I would have to ask the question sometime. I would ask it of Roy, or of Ethelyn, or of both of them together, today or tomorrow, in one way or another. But I knew I would ask the question: Have you been having an affair with each other, or am I losing my mind? Otherwise, I would live forever in this strange, dark hollow, full of echoes, mirrors, shadows, suffocated by doubts and suspicions.

"Come and eat," Roy called. "It's getting cold."

I stood up, opened the bathroom door and went into the kitchen. It was that simple.

We sat at the kitchen table, and there were scrambled eggs and toast and coffee and my French pastry in front of me. But my thoughts had become obsessed with the question, and I couldn't eat.

"What's the matter? Don't you feel well? Is your ankle hurting you a lot?" Roy asked

"No. It's not too bad." I put down my fork. "Roy, I've got this crazy idea in my head, and I've got to say it out loud to get it out of my head. I don't know what's wrong with me. I hope you'll both forgive me. No, excuse me is what I mean. Anyhow, try to understand. I got it into my head just now—a little while ago—that you and I thelyn are having an . . . are involved in some way with each other. I mean, you can see how I could think that, even if it's crazy, I mean, coming back and finding you here. It's all perfectly silly, I know. And I don't know what I want you to tell me. Or don't even tell me anything. It was just getting the idea out in the daylight so it wouldn't keep strangling me. Do you see what I mean, in a way? How I could feel like that and everything?"

Neither of them said anything. They looked at each other, then looked away. And I was so upset that I was sure the look they exchanged was the one I had anticipated of genuine alarm over my sanity. There was nothing more I could say, and they said nothing, and we sat in silence for what must have been a full minute.

Finally I said, full of self-loathing, "I'm sorry, God, but I'm sorry. Forgive me, please, if you can."

At which point I thelyn gave a little gasp, pushed back her chair, buried her face in her hands, and began to sob hysterically. Mozart continued his precise music in the living room, and below the kitchen window in the alley a man with a pushcart bawled, "Rags, rags." The steam in the radiators hissed, and the clock in the kitchen ticked, and at first I didn't under-



stand why Ethelyn was sobbing. So convinced had I become that my hypothesis about Ethelyn and Roy was some kind of bizarre delusion, I couldn't believe her sobs were for anything except my lost sanity—or my false friendship.

"Ethelyn, believe me, I'm sorry. Please. I could bite my tongue out now—"

She looked up then, and even though she had been sobbing violently, her eyes were dry. "Well, don't bite your tongue out. For Christ's sake, don't bite your tongue out! That's all I need." And she started to laugh—giggle, rather.

I looked at Roy then. He was looking at his fingernails.

"Do you mean it's true?" I asked.

"What?" Roy replied, and he smiled that foolish smile which precedes the discovery of the surprise party guests hiding in the dining room.

It infuriated me. "What?" I cried. "You know what. Are you and Ethelyn having an affair?"

It sounded so awful said out loud that I thought the prickly waves of heat rising up my throat would strangle me.

"Don't be silly," he said.

"Silly?" I shrieked. "Silly?"

"Roy, tell her." Ethelyn's voice sounded as if she were having a violent chill.

"Tell me what?" I couldn't look at either of them now. I looked out the kitchen window and saw a woman come out to her back porch with a large lampshade and begin to brush it vigorously with a whisk broom. "It's true, isn't it?"

Little clouds of dust drifted off the bottom of the lampshade, and when the woman finished her brushing she inspected its surface, smiled with satisfaction and went inside.

"Yes, it's true," Roy said at last in a low voice.

I remember feeling quite bewildered by his reply, and I turned to both of them then and asked, "What's true?" And Ethelyn stood up unsteadily and left the room.

Roy did not reply. At last I said, "I think we'd better talk

about it. Let's go in the other room." I stood up. I had forgotten about my ankle, and as I put my full weight on it I almost collapsed. Roy helped me into the living room.

Life is full of crisis situations as sad or terrible as those found in books. Yet I, at least, never know how to behave in such situations. It surprised me that the living room looked exactly as it had before, that I was aware of the hurt in my ankle, that I had room for irrelevant thoughts about the woman with the lampshade. I was surprised that my feelings did not correspond to the enormity of the situation. I felt much calmer than I had fifteen minutes earlier, before my suspicions had been confirmed. All I felt now was curiosity: How? why? where? when? and all the million little details I would need to piece it all together. I had no words that seemed quite appropriate to open the scene. We become quite expert in the playing of the minor scenes in life — the hostess feigning delight, the anxious parent acting wise and calm — but we have no training, no rehearsals, for the major scenes.

Ethelyn had turned off the Mozart and was standing, her back to the room, looking out the window. I sat down on the couch. Roy sat down in a chair. "Come and sit down, Ethelyn," I said. She turned and came. And do you know what I felt? I felt a little thrill of anticipation, as if the three of us were about to watch a play on television — a widely advertised play with good advance notices.

"Now would you mind telling me all about it," I said to both of them. The sentence came out sounding sarcastic, but I didn't mean it that way.

Roy lit a cigarette. "Yes, I would," he said. "Not in this setting. Not right now. Go get packed, Ruthie. I'll take you to the hotel."

"I don't want to go to the hotel yet. I think we have quite a bit to talk about before I go to the hotel."

"Nothing that won't wait."

"Why did you come here this afternoon? I've got to know that right now."

"Because I asked him to come," Ethelyn said, when he didn't reply.

But I couldn't look at her now. So I continued addressing and looking at Roy. "You mean," I asked, "that Ethelyn didn't have a headache this morning? You planned it all—laid plans carefully, I mean—to get me out of the way?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Last night."

"When last night? You weren't alone."

"At the restaurant. While you were at the bathroom."

"Oh." I was beginning to feel shaky and hot again. "How did you know I'd go shopping alone? How did you know I wouldn't decide to stay home and take care of Ethelyn?"

"We didn't. It was very tentative."

"Ruthie, don't!" Ethelyn cried.

"Why not? Do you think my fantasies are more palatable than the truth?" When neither one replied I covered my eyes with my hand and said, "Just answer me one thing, Roy: Are you in love with Ethelyn?"

But it was Ethelyn who answered me. "No, he isn't." Then: "What do you want to know, Ruthie?"

"Everything. Begin at the beginning, please. It's the least you can do for me."

vig "All right."

At this point Roy stood up and left the room, but I scarcely noticed his departure, so eager was I to hear Ethelyn's story. I specked her full in the face now and repeated, "Begin at the beginning, please."

I was beginning, according to her, was on a Friday afternoon in October, 1957. She had encountered Roy, quite by Ethelyn, in Marshall Field's toy department, where she had Roy buy a birthday gift for Clarence's nephew, and where

Roy, it seemed, was selecting gifts to take home to his children—our children.

"I remember," I interrupted. "Roy brought Barbara her Raggedy Ann that trip."

Ethelyn stared at me in what seemed to be bewilderment. Then she continued. Clarence was out of town that day. He was often out of town, it seemed, attending one academic meeting or another, flying to New York to see his publishers, going to the West Coast now and then to confer with colleagues. Roy, unexpectedly, had had to stay an extra day in Chicago that trip and consequently felt rather put upon and rather at loose ends. One thing had led to another, and the upshot of it all was that Roy had invited her to have dinner with him.

"Where?" I asked

"The Flame," she replied. And then she added with what seemed to me like unnecessary malice, "We had barbecued ribs."

"So?" I prompted her

So over their barbecued ribs, it seemed, Roy and Ethelyn had "clicked." As she put it, "Something clicked, and before we knew it, it was ten o'clock and we were still sitting there talking." They were still talking when they left the Flame—about what, I'm sure I don't know. But from the few things Roy has said since, I gather Ethelyn appeared to share all his interests, all his values. At any rate, they stopped at a little bar that Roy liked on the Near North Side, but evidently the atmosphere was wrong. So Ethelyn had suggested they pick up a bottle and go back to her apartment instead. They could sit in front of the fire, be comfortable, continue their inspired conversation. After all, they were adults, old friends . . .

"Old friends?" I put in mildly. "More like friends-in-law, weren't you?"

Ethelyn winced. She reached for a cigarette, took a very long

time lighting it, but even after the cigarette was lit she remained silent.

"And so? Continue," I said.

"So that was it. That's all."

"Oh, come now. That was only the beginning."

Ethelyn bit her lip. Then she looked at me, and the strange docility she had been exhibiting for the past few minutes had left her. "Look, Ruthie," she said quietly but coldly. "I'm not going into the details of the bedroom. It went on for two years: that's all you need to know. Roy is not in love with me. You're not going to lose your husband. I think that's all you need to know."

"Not at all," I replied. "I here are quite a few more things I need to know. For instance, I need to know whether you're in love with him."

"That's my business, I think."

I was furious, but I managed to keep my voice calm. "I am Roy's wife," I said slowly and deliberately. "Therefore, unfortunately, everything about this sordid affair is my business."

Now Ethelyn exploded. She stood up, waving her cigarette wildly. "Good God Almighty, you can say that again!" She walked the length of the room, turned, retraced her steps and stopped directly before me. "Just exactly why in the hell do you think a man climbs into another woman's bed? *Why?* Because he's depraved? Oversexed? Do you think sex is all hormones? What do you mean, *sordid*? Oh, everything's so damned simple for you, isn't it? Well, listen to me, my little girl, and I use the 'little girl' advisedly: It behoves you to take a good long look at yourself one of these days. And at your husband, while you're at it. And you just might discover that you're not one of those adorable couples that live in the *Ladies' Home Journal*!"

Before I had a chance to reply Roy returned to the living room, carrying my suitcase and coat. "Come on," he said. "You've had enough. Both of you."

"I should say I have!" Ethelyn's voice was trembling now.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow when you've calmed down, Ethelyn," I said coolly.

Ethelyn gave a short, half-hysterical laugh. "I?" she cried. "I calm down?"

"Certainly you—" I began. But Roy took my arm roughly then and almost pushed me into the hall. And Ethelyn, *calm* Ethelyn, literally slammed the door behind us!

Outside, it was raining, through a kind of yellowish-grey gloom. Lights were on in all the apartment houses and stores. The snow was almost gone—dissolved in large sooty puddles. It took a while for Roy to find a cab. I scarcely noticed the rain, yet I noticed other, less obvious things. A child's sled with a broken rope, forlorn in the middle of the wet sidewalk. A woman in open-toed sandals, trying to avoid the puddles. A dirty white dog with a sore eye.

The cab smelled of wet wool and stale tobacco smoke. It was too warm. I sat in my corner, not touching Roy, not looking at him, not speaking to him. I looked out the window and read all the signs I looked at, and then I looked out the window at the cold grey expanse of Lake Michigan.

"I want a room of my own at the hotel," I said to Roy.

"All right," he replied.

That was all we said until he dismissed the bellboy from my room.

Oh how I hate hotel rooms—even now! They stand for everything that frightens me—homelessness, impersonality, meetings and partings, normality suspended, life itself suspended, the remnants of strangers (hairpins, and the muffled sound of flushing toilets), locks and keys, caution and suspicion, the printed rules for emergencies. The Bible itself becomes in a hotel room simply a book of rules to cover any

conceivable emergency. And in spite of all their cellophane and clean sheets, hotel rooms seem dirty to me.

Yet there's a certain glamour about a hotel room that never ceases to attract me. Like a New Year's Eve party. Always I think, This sojourn in a hotel, that New Year's Eve party, may become the mysterious, the exciting, the glamorous sojourn or party that other people talk about. But I have never yet even enjoyed a New Year's Eve party, and the instant I close the door in a hotel room I am suffocated by claustrophobia (the world is five stories down in an elevator) and overcome by uneasiness.

After the bellboy left I took off my coat, hung it in the cupboard, combed my hair—still not speaking to Roy, still not looking at him. Roy took off his coat, threw it across the bed and sat down in one of the easy chairs.

"Are you planning to stay?" I asked at last, and my voice sounded tight and far off, as if I hadn't used it for days.

"Yes."

"I don't want you to. Go to your own room."

"No. You want to talk."

"I do not."

I began to unpack my suitcase, to save my clothes from the wrinkles Roy's hurried packing would have caused. Roy sat in the easy chair, leafing (unseeingly) through one of my magazines. I did want to talk, but I couldn't. I felt as if there were a great boulder in me that would have to be rolled aside before the words could come out, and the strength required to roll aside that boulder was not in me.

"What did you do with my manicure things?" I asked.

"What?"

"My manicure things! The things I fix my fingernails with!"

"I don't know. Look in that pocket."

I looked. They were in the pocket. I took my nail file, sat down on the edge of the bed and began to file my nails. Roy continued to turn the pages of the magazine restlessly. The si-

lence continued, broken only by faraway street sounds, faraway elevator sounds. At last it became unbearable, and I said quietly, still filing my nails, "Answer me one thing. Did you call her from St. Paul and discuss my trip? Did you say, 'Darling, something awful has happened—your old friend, my wife, wants to come to visit you?'"

"No. I didn't say that," he said quietly.

"Did you call her?"

"Yes."

It was the humiliation that was so terrible, the humiliation of being *discussed*, like a faulty furnace or a troublesome old grandmother. "What shall we do about her? How can we handle her?" Oh, I could hear them making plans, rehearsing scenes, adjusting themselves to a different kind of assignation. Such a clever couple, too! So much cleverer and more resourceful than I, in every way! And when we meet at the station, you might mention I've put on weight, or something of the sort." "And you be terribly nice on the train to lull her, and maybe a few drinks for good measure, just to cover any possible slips." I couldn't bear it!

"What did you say when you called her? What did you say right at the beginning? I suppose you said your wife didn't understand you."

He didn't reply.

"I understand you all right! I understand you too well! Just exactly how long did you think something like this could go on? Or were you planning to keep right on if by any chance you had got safely through this—this inconvenient visit of mine?"

"You don't plan things like that."

"What do you do, then? Please tell me. I wouldn't know. Do you just get swept away by ecstasy?"

He sighed. "Look. I know this is damned rough on you, Ruthie. It's rough on me too, believe me." He paused. "See if this makes any sense to you." He paused again. "You grow



up. You get married when you're twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three years old. And life is great. And nothing could be better. And not for a minute do you wish, really, that you had married someone else. It never occurs to you. Your wife is like water or air or food or something. You go along for years and years, and then one day it just hits you: Is this all? Am I going to go on until I'm eighty, shovelling snow and going to the office at eight-thirty every morning, and then die?"

"Why not?" I interrupted. "What's so tragic about that? You have a nice home, a good job, friends, fun, three nice children. What in God's name is so tragic about living out your days like that?"

"Nothing," he said at last. Then: "Ruthie, believe me, this has nothing to do with you. Look: a man doesn't hand over his body and soul, complete with blinders for both, when he marries. And no one person can ever satisfy all the needs of another person. Does that make any sense? This business is strictly between me and my own immortal soul. Ethelyn is an attractive woman, but . . . well, good God, Ruthie! This kind of thing happens every day of the week all over the world. It's not unique. It has nothing to do with how I feel about you. Believe that!"

Nothing to do with me! Oh that was a familiar one! How many times had I heard that? In fact, now that I thought of it, the whole scene was a familiar one: the Chicago hotel room, the girl who had nothing to do with me. We were performing a play, the prologue of which, it seemed, had been performed in 1945. The girl in 1945—Jo, whatever her name was—had had nothing to do with me either. Not a thing, not a thing, except ruin my life and the life of our son.

"Like Jo?" I said. "She had nothing to do with me either. Did she?"

Roy stood up and began pacing around the room. I could see he was beginning to get angry, and I suppose, actually,

that's what I was after. There is nothing more maddening than to have someone remain reasonable while you rage.

"Well, it seems to me," I continued, "that you and your ladies that don't have anything to do with me have gone too far this time!"

He stopped his pacing right in front of me. "Ruthie," he said, and now his eyes were sparkling with anger, "you've been using Jo to club me over the head with ever since 1945. And now you have a bat for your other hand. What are you going to do with it?"

"What do you mean? What do you mean, I've been clubbing you over the head with Jo? This is the first time I've mentioned her—even *thought* of her—for years!"

"Do you want to know? Shall I tell you?"

"Please do. By all means, please do."

"All right." He was breathing hard. He pulled up the desk chair and straddled it backwards and began what struck me as the most remarkable recitation of wrongs and affronts, the most outlandish distortion of reality, that I had ever heard.

It seemed that in the beginning I was a lovely girl, a lovely wife, and our life promised to be one full of happiness, good works and adventure. But somewhere along the way (during the war years) either I fell in with evil company (my parents) or my true colours (again my parents) began to show. And he came home after two years overseas to find a stranger instead of a familiar wife--a smug, shallow little girl whose idea of the highest good in life was a ranch house in a subdivision and a flock of children all of whom, he assumed, would be afraid of dogs and whose bowels would have to be regulated by suppositories. The true state of affairs didn't quite hit him at first, and he had told me all about Jo, along with everything else meaningful that had happened to him. And he had told me all about his plans for the future, too, for his brave new world. His plans for the future seemed to involve the interpretation of Asia to America and America to Asia, or some

such thing. And he had ready, yes, ready and waiting in Washington, the first small plan for that larger future.

But it seemed, he said, that the plan didn't pay very much, and a ranch house in St. Paul, Minnesota, did not go with it. And in the final analysis, children couldn't live in Asia, could they? And besides, who else was living in Asia? Jo was living in Asia. And according to him, it was completely beyond me to conceive of a man wanting to go back to Asia for any reason other than to revive an old love affair. And so I had clubbed him with Jo, over and over again, until he became so insensible that he allowed himself to be bought. Yes, bought! It's not every returning veteran, he said, whose father-in-law thinks enough of him to present him with the following gifts: a down payment on a four-bedroom ranch house ("might as well get all the bedrooms right away—you'll need 'em"), a new car (and you had to have *connections* in those days to get a new car) and a nice shiny job-with-a-future in advertising.

I didn't mention to him that his "plan" in Washington had percolated gently for almost a year before it was ready. And what, exactly, would we have done during that year? And having spent the year, in not *too* great misery, were we then to throw it all over for the first step toward a very unreal-sounding dream? This was clubbing him over the head with Jo?

But according to him it was. According to him, every attempt he had made to become something other than the proper and promising son-in-law of the Samuel Osters of Woodrow Avenue had been met by me with a scene, either about the Asia dream or about Jo. He alleged that I wouldn't let him talk politics with Dad or Uncle Joe or any of his senior business associates. I wouldn't let him drink or relax at parties. I wouldn't go walking with him at two in the morning, and the lawn must be free of dandelions at all times, and he must always wear good-looking sports clothes while freeing the lawn of dandelions. Why must he go to football games (which bored him) just because he happened to be built like a foot-

ball player? And why was I always trying to get him to read *Time* magazine, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, or some damned best seller? He alleged that every time he talked politics, drank too much, smiled at a lady, kept irregular hours, neglected his duties as homeowner, wore comfortable clothes, pursued his own offbeat interests, I got nervous and eventually made some accusation about the Asia dream or Jo.

He paused, and I yelled at him, "What else? Can't you think of anything else I've done to ruin your life?"

"Isn't that enough?" he shouted, and his voice cracked.

"Poor little boy, driven at gunpoint, I suppose, to take dandelions out of the lawn. I've never heard such sickening self-pity! It's so simple, isn't it, to be able to blame everything on me, the cruel master. And who are you? The poor little slave? You make it sound as if you were some sort of slave or prisoner who had no control over his own life."

"I said I was bought, didn't I?"

"And how about Ethelyn? Did she buy you too? For a little trinket? Is that why you hate her too?"

"I don't hate her. Where did you get that idea?"

"She says herself you're not in love with her. Or are you?"

"No. Unfortunately I'm not in love with Ethelyn."

"Unfortunately? Why unfortunately?"

"I mean it might be simpler if I were. Because unfortunately she thinks she's in love with me."

"Why, you conceited ass!" I hissed at him. "I suppose you're very proud of that, aren't you? How do you know? And even if you know, you ought to have the decency not to say it."

"The good manners, you mean. The good taste. Ruthie, for God's sake, do you want lies right on down to the bitter end? I'm telling you the truth for a change, and it doesn't always square with Emily Post."

"Not Emily Post. The finer instincts of the human race."

"All right, the finer instincts of the human race. So I'm a bastard. Let's go on from there."

**"You are a bastard," I said. "How could you sleep with her for two years without being in love with her? I'd rather think you were in love with her. It wouldn't reflect so terribly on you. And on me. I'd rather think that than what I am thinking about you."**

**"What are you thinking?"**

**"That you're not much more than an animal, really."**

**He smiled foolishly, and his smile maddened me.**

**"Sex without love? What do you call that?" I yelled. "I call it the kind of activity you see around a female dog in heat. That's what I call it!"**

**"The word is bitch," he said.**

**Usually I can tell beforehand when I'm going to cry, when I've reached the saturation point. But this time I had no more notion than Roy had that my saturation point had been reached. When he said the word "bitch," something dissolved my fury into desperate, grief-stricken tears, and I found myself sprawled across the bed on top of Roy's coat, my nail file clutched tightly in one hand. I could think of nothing now, except that his coat smelled of fried foods and that I didn't know what to do. I cried and cried. After a while he came over and sat beside me and touched my shoulder gently, but he said nothing. I kept thinking, If only he'd say something, I could stop crying. At last I couldn't stand it any more. "Aren't you even going to say you're sorry?" I hiccupped.**

**"No," he said calmly. "Because I'm not."**

**It took me a few moments to get control of my breathing, my voice, my saliva. "What did you say?"**

**"I said I'm not sorry. I'm sorry for the mess it made, yes. But I'm not sorry for what you want me to be sorry about. And it won't help to say I am."**

**"Then get out of here! Get out of here right away! And don't ever come back! I don't ever want to see you again."**

**He stood up, reached for his coat.**

**"Sit down," I screamed. "You said I wanted to talk. I'll talk, all right. I'll say lots. I have lots to say."**

**But he didn't sit down. He put on his coat, looked for his hat.**

**"Where are you going?" I cried in panic.**

**"To call Ethelyn and to get us some dinner," he replied quietly.**

**"You can do both from here," I said, indicating the phone.**

**"I know," he answered "I'll be back in half an hour or so." And he left the room.**

**Do you know how it is when you have a high fever? You fall into a half-sleep full of faces and voices, whirling lights and colors? It takes you hours, it seems, to struggle from that sleep and finally you awaken to discover that your sleep has lasted only ten minutes. The real world (the dishes clattering in the kitchen, the laundry man at the back door) and the other world (the faces, the voices) alternate kaleidescopically, but time itself moves so slowly that you think you may already have died.**

**That's how that afternoon seemed to me. One minute I was calm and rational - taking a shower, bathing my swollen eyes, smoking a cigarette, telling myself that indeed I was making too big a fuss over something that must happen to millions of women every year. If Roy would make any sort of gesture of repentance, tell me in any way (not necessarily verbal, even) that he loved me and was sorry he had hurt me, I would forgive him, try to forget all of it, go back to St. Paul and resume my life with him as before. After all, a little scar tissue on an eighteen-year-old marriage is nothing so unusual. And who in St. Paul, besides the two of us, would ever know about it? That was important. It would be easy, once one had set one's mind to it, and with no one else knowing, to forget. And in time it might be as if it had never happened.**

**But the next minute I would hear Roy saying he was *not* sorry, hear his words about the suppositories, the dandelions,**

the ranch house. Then I would find myself lying across the bed again, staring at the angles made by half-open doors. No, no, it's impossible to go on living with him—a man so full of resentment and self-pity, a man who hates me. In time I would hate myself. And hate him. I hate him already! Then I would find myself telling my story in a hundred versions to a hundred different people: the children, my parents, Roy's mother, Clarence Campbell, Linda's music teacher, the butcher, our neighbors across the alley. My mind would get stuck on meaningless little phrases and repeat and repeat, like a broken record, "Of course you must realize that, of course you must realize that, of course you must . . ."

At times it seemed to me that I was powerless to do anything about this crisis. I could only wait and see what would happen to me, like a puppet or a chessman. At other times I was terrified by the notion that everything I said, did, thought, during the next few hours would decide the course of the rest of my life. But I found I couldn't think, I couldn't decide anything, because I couldn't keep my mind on the problem long enough. Instead, I would suddenly find myself wondering if it might not be smart to get some silk and make a dressy blouse for my black velvet holiday skirt.

Roy was gone almost two hours. During this time my fever, so to speak, broke. By the time he returned I felt a little light-headed, but clear. Clear, rational, almost detached about the whole situation. I did not mention that he had been gone two hours instead of half an hour. I did not inquire after Ethelyn. We ate in silence the food he had brought back with him. When we had finished I said quite calmly, "Do you want a divorce, Roy?"

"Of course not."

"Why of course not? If you meant all the things you said to me, I don't see how we can go on living together."

"Things can change."

"Sometimes. Sometimes they can't. I'm sorry, but I think it would be quite impossible to start over from scratch and build a whole new personality."

"I'm not asking you to do that."

"What are you asking me to do, then?"

"I'm not asking you to do anything. Yes, I am. I'm asking you, for once, to quit feeling what you think you ought to feel and just *feel*. If you can do that, maybe we can tell where to go from here."

"All right! I *feel* I can no longer go on living with you. I *feel* you have behaved in a way that not only destroys all my respect for you but also defies understanding. You may not want a divorce, but I do. The way I feel about you now, I can scarcely sit in the same room with you, let alone sleep in the same bed with you."

I could tell I had hurt him. His face contorted in his familiar hurt grimace and he said very earnestly, "Ruthie, do you know what a divorce is? It's not just a word. I think you're using it like that. Given this situation, you ask for a divorce—the way you say 'I thank you for a lovely evening' after a party."

I refused to answer him, and he continued. "We can't get out of it so easily. What do you want a divorce for? What would you do if you were divorced?"

"I'd never have to lay eyes on you again."

"Yes you would. We have three children."

"I'd get custody of them!"

"Certainly you would. So what?"

I didn't reply.

"Why do you think I'd want a divorce?"

"You could marry one of your women that don't have anything to do with me. Or you could be free to climb into anyone's bed without a lot of 'mess,' as you say."

"I'm afraid you're wrong there. I'm afraid you overestimate my charms and capabilities."

"Perhaps I do. But there's Ethelyn. She'd love to marry



you. And you'd make such a fine couple. Both so witty and intelligent and above-it-all. A very superior couple." My fever was returning, and when I lit a cigarette my hands shook.

He was silent for a minute. Then he said, "Do you know why I was gone so long? I went out to see Ethelyn."

"I gathered as much. I don't care to hear any of the details."

"There are some details you should hear. Ethelyn was being very sensible. Surprisingly so. She was polishing silver in the kitchen when I arrived. She had calmed down, wanted me to apologize to you for some of the nasty things she said to you. She's going to call you in the morning."

"What a lovely gesture! What a perfectly lovely thing for her to think of doing!"

"Now wait a minute, Ruthie. We won't get anywhere in this mess, anywhere at all, if you don't calm down too! Nothing's to be gained by ranting and raving. Ethelyn's behaving very well. I expected she'd be pretty well crooked by this time. I went out there, actually, expecting to have to pour her into bed. Instead—"

"I'm sure you did!" I screeched at him. "I'm sure that's just what you had in mind. To pour her into bed and climb in right after her!" I don't know what came over me: it was as if a great flame had started at the soles of my feet and swept right through my body and out my mouth. I felt as if I were choking. I wanted to shout all kinds of foul words, but I couldn't "Oh, what a disappointment! What a disappointment for you that she wasn't—"

Roy reached over and slapped my face.

I gasped. Never, never before in our entire life together, had he even come close to slapping me. It was out of the question. It was insane. Only people who write letters to lovelorn columns strike each other. My husband slapped me! He struck me! I didn't know what to do. It was I who should have struck him. Nothing made any sense. I couldn't even think. I sat there for a minute in silence, feeling my cheek tingle and grow

warm. And then I felt I had to get out of that room, get away from him—quickly, quickly. And in that hideous hotel room, there was no place to go except to the bathroom.

I stood up, walked slowly to the bathroom, closed the door. I don't know what happened to my mind then. I can only report what I did. I picked up the water glass on the shelf above the washbasin and hurled it into the bathtub. Then I picked up a piece of jagged glass and started to cut my left wrist with it. I say "started," because I had made only a small scratch when Roy opened the door, took the glass out of my hand, picked me up and carried me back to the room and threw me down on the bed. Then he sat down on the edge of the bed, took hold of both my wrists, pinioned my arms over my head and breathed into my face. "Ruthie, if you don't stop this nonsense I'm going to break every goddamned bone in your body. You want to get this mess straightened out? All right. It's now or never. But I'm through—all through—with these —scenes. Is that clear?"

I was terrified. He knew how I hated that word, and he had never before, deliberately, used it in front of me. He was like a stranger. For all I knew, he might choke me in his fury. Yet I couldn't stop. I was on fire with rage and jealousy. I was insane. A thousand obscene pictures of Roy and Ethelyn together flashed before my eyes, like some foolish exhibition of slides. I had to know. I had to know everything—all the words, the settings, the feelings. I had to know all the details or stay insane forever.

So I said, "No, it's not clear. I haven't even begun yet. Take your hands off me. Take your hands away. I'm not Ethelyn. Oh, I bet you wish I were. I bet you've pretended lots of times, haven't you? Pretended I was a little cat in your arms . . ." On and on I went. I didn't care if he choked me now. I didn't care if he killed me!

But he didn't. He released my wrists. He opened my robe.

And we made love right there on the edge of the bed, on top of the bedspread, with all the lights on.

We lay there silently then, for a long time. Finally he said, "Maybe we can begin to talk now."

I didn't reply. I couldn't. I was shivering. My teeth were chattering. I got up then and went to the bathroom. The sight of the broken glass in the bathtub made me sick, and I vomitted in the toilet.

He helped me back to bed, turned out the lights, sat in the chair and lit a cigarette.

"I just want to sleep now," I said. "No more talk."

"All right." He stood up to go.

"Roy! Don't go! Please. I'm afraid."

"All right." He started to take off his clothes.

"Don't come into this bed. Sit in the chair."

"I'm not going to sit up all night."

"Yes you are. I can't stand it if you touch me again. Ever."

But I couldn't spend that night alone. He continued to undress and slipped into bed beside me. And I fell asleep, finally, clinging in panic to the back of a man who filled me with loathing and terror.

# *Part Three*



**L**FFLL ASL FFF, YES; but I awoke again in half an hour. The luminous dial of my traveller alarm clock told me it was exactly half an hour; yet it seemed as if I had been running for days and days through fields of dandelions. The dandelions were tall as ripe corn, and as I pushed through them they made my hands smart and burn, the way nettle does. I was looking for Roy, and I called and called, until my throat ached with the strain, as I ran through those awful yellow fields. At last I came upon him, standing beneath a large oak tree. But when he turned around I saw that the figure wasn't Roy at all: it was Jerry Gates, the captain I had known at Lake Minnehaha during the war. He approached me with the menacing step of a Frankenstein's monster, but just as his hands were about to close around my throat he smiled charmingly and said, "Have you looked at *all* the magazines?"

"Yes!" I screamed silently. "Yes! Yes! Yes!" And then I woke up. My heart was so full of terror that I must have lain in that bed for a full five minutes before I could summon the courage to move. The circulation in my hands had stopped; they felt like large, spiked sponges. The dry, steam-heated air of the hotel room had parched my throat. At last I got out of bed, drank two glasses of cold water, smoked part of a cigarette. I opened the window a crack, plumped my pillow, and returned, finally, to bed; only to find that now I could not sleep at all.

Well, I didn't need a psychiatrist to interpret that dream for me. It was perfectly clear to me that my subconscious mind had been greatly troubled by Roy's and Ethelyn's accusations. And why shouldn't it have been? I had been called, after all, a shrewish and domineering wife. A spoiled little girl. A shallow and superficial character (Ethelyn's sarcastic reference to *The Ladies' Home Journal* had not been lost on me). And a jealous and obtuse woman who, simply because she had some respect for the sanctity of the marriage vows, knew nothing about either sex or love. Or about life, for that matter. Or death. Or anything more subtle than a meat loaf, say, or a pair of kitchen curtains!

The longer I considered their charges, the more ridiculous—the more contradictory!—they seemed. In the same breath, I had been described as a spoiled little girl and accused of possessing traits that belong only to mature women—such traits as a sense of propriety, a sense of responsibility, the ability to live for something besides the immediate moment, the immediate gratification of the senses. As for leading the life of a *Ladies' Home Journal* heroine, that charge might have inspired chuckles in me had it been made by anyone but Ethelyn. How could Ethelyn, knowing so well the circumstances of my life before, during, and even after the war, have made such a ridiculous charge? The kind of life I had been led to expect might, perhaps, have been a *Ladies' Home Journal* kind of

life; but it so happened I had never lived the kind of life I had been led to expect.

Consider the two versions. First, the expectation. You grow up, go to college, have fun. You meet a man and fall in love and receive a diamond ring, which you radiantly display to all your friends. Then follows a round of showers and shopping, house hunting and honeymoon planning, dress fittings and happy tears and strawberry meringues with whipped cream. You leave your wedding in a shower of rice and embark on your glorious honeymoon where you will be able to wear filmy peignoirs over your filmy nightgowns. Then you return to your house (which has five rooms to begin with), to your porcelain lamps on matching end tables, to your gay little breakfast sets and new sandwich grills, to jugs of lilacs on the mantelpiece and sunshine flooding through yellow curtains. And your husband goes to work—downtown, where he has business associates and luncheon engagements, where he meets important people whom you entertain graciously with the lovely linen tablecloths, the covered silver vegetable dishes and Spode demitasse cups you received as wedding presents. You become a good housekeeper, a good cook—your silver is polished weekly, your range is always sparkling, your sheets are snowy white. You become famous for piecrust, perhaps, or homemade bread, or angel cakes. And then you have children—a minimum of two, a maximum of four. There's nothing to having children if you're healthy. And there's nothing to raising them either. Feed them on schedule, keep them clean and sweet, teach them to say "please" and "thank you" and not to touch things on coffee tables. Buy them toys at Christmas; hide Easter eggs at Easter. Teach them to look both ways before crossing the street; teach them to tell the truth at all times; let them have lots of fresh air and sunshine and space to run off their energy in. Teach them to practice the Golden Rule, to stand up when an adult enters a room. And before you know it they will be in college, then getting married, repeating the



pattern, and finally you will be celebrating your twenty-fifth wedding anniversary and harvesting the fruits of your twenty-five years of labour. Obey the Ten Commandments; avoid the Seven Deadly Sins; remember that cleanliness is next to godliness; and that's all there is to it!

Yes indeed! But consider now the life I actually led. Roy and I were married on December 13, 1941, six days after Pearl Harbour, at the beginning of a period dedicated to the destruction not only of cleanliness and godliness but of all ten Commandments and the very concept of sin itself. I received my diamond engagement ring for Christmas—in 1955. And we spent our honeymoon not in New Orleans, as we had planned, but at the Great Lakes Naval Training Station near Chicago. Roy seemed to feel it was more important to secure an ensign's commission at that point than to fulfil our old dream of wandering hand in hand through the French Quarter of New Orleans. He did not receive his ensign's commission on our honeymoon because of his asthma history. And so we returned to the Twin Cities.

Roy's asthma, however, was not severe enough to prevent his being called in the draft; his 1B classification meant simply "Wait a bit—we'll get around to you before too long." So instead of beginning a career of some sort, he returned to the university to begin work on a master's degree in journalism, which he neither wanted nor needed. Dad paid his tuition, continued my clothes allowance; Roy had two part-time publicity jobs, sold an article to *The Saturday Evening Post*, worked desultorily on a novel he had begun two years earlier. I did some clerical work in the Psychology Department. And we lived in a two-room, third-floor, furnished apartment in Southeast Minneapolis, close to the campus. The apartment had a sagging studio couch, a worn, flowered carpet and green window blinds in the living room; a stained-glass window, leaky faucets and cockroaches in the kitchen. We shared the bath with another graduate-student couple. We tacked up

Picasso and Matisse all over the dun-coloured walls, used our sandwich grill, our pewter beer mugs, our record player; packed away all the rest of our wedding presents—our lovely linens, silver and crystal—in the Woodrow Avenue attic. We ate chocolate éclairs for breakfast, cleaned the apartment only when we felt like it, went for walks at 4 A.M., lied to our landlady about our kitten. . . .

In April, 1942, Roy was reclassified 1A; and in June he left for basic training in the South. Over the heated protests of my parents I joined him almost at once. For over a year then we lived in basements, in attics, in trailers, in rooming houses, over gas stations. I worked in dime stores, in drugstores, behind lunch counters and information desks. Some weeks I saw Roy often, other weeks not at all. Some nights I spent half the night crying, full of fear and loneliness. Other nights I felt so strong, so powerful, so completely alive, so much a part of Our Time, so much a brother to all men, that I would get up and open the window and sit looking out at the moon in the live-oak trees, exulting. Exulting in what? I was never able to formulate the exultation into words. Whenever I tried, it turned out that I had nothing, really, to exult in. Even then, I was quite aware that I was not living the kind of life I had planned to live, or been trained to live, frying eggs in margarine on someone else's greasy stove, living with ecru lace curtains and wedding photographs of strangers on cracked marble-topped tables, washing sheets in bathtubs and rolling piecrust with milk bottles. There were certainly no yellow curtains or jugs of lilacs in this life. And yet, as I recalled it, life had seemed good during that time—vital, meaningful, somehow exhilarating. . . .

But good heavens, I was young then! I was a little girl, in a sense, at that time. Did Roy expect me to go on forever indulging in the excessive emotions of adolescence, eating chocolate éclairs for breakfast and cheerfully ignoring the world of adults? It seemed this must have been the creature he was

mourning, the wonderful Girl He Left Behind, the girl who had disappeared into thin air by the time he returned from India. Yet he no longer approved of little girls—or so he said. Obviously, he was caught in a hopeless contradiction, as people often are when they hurl accusations at others.

That little girl had to grow up—and she did grow up—during his absence. She had to grow up, or perish—the way Mary Louise perished. It is one thing to be able to meet emergencies with gallantry and gaiety: this, I think, is one of youth's special talents. But it requires quite different talent—it requires *maturity*!—to be able to endure boredom, to be able to wait and wait and wait for some dateless future†

In August of 1943, then, Roy was sent to OCS, and I, because I was four months pregnant with Teddy, returned to St. Paul; and Teddy was born in January, twenty-four days after Roy embarked for overseas. Now came the test of my true strength, my ability to grow up. Gallantry and gaiety were as useless to me at that point as a strapless bathing suit. Ahead of me lay only tubs of soaking diapers, boiling bottles, Dextri-Maltose and liver soup, boric ointment for red bottoms, ration stamps and Arnold Gessell and mail.

Mail! The mailman came at ten and at four. Roy's letters usually arrived in bunches: six on a Monday, say, five more on a Tuesday, then nothing for ten days. I wrote to him every night, telling him all about Teddy, all about clothes I had bought, meals I had eaten, friends I had seen, how the apple trees looked in the back yard as they came into bud. He wrote me long descriptions of India—the landscape, the people, the feel of the place. The pain of being separated from Roy was acute for the first three months; then it began to lessen. I began to skip his descriptions of India and his long passages on Eastern philosophy and to look only for the "I love you" part at the end of the letter. He may have done the same with my letters—I've never asked him. But there was a ritual importance both to writing and to receiving letters; without them,

he didn't exist. The days without mail were days without reality. Yet the days with four or five letters were not proportionately joyous. I needed his letters, like air, in order to continue to live. But as long as one has air—well, one doesn't build a life on the mere presence of a necessity like air.

No, the high spots in those days were no more than anthills in a bleak and endless prairie: receiving an unexpected supply of cigarettes, buying a new blouse, playing bridge occasionally with other similarly situated wives. The ennui, the unreality of the endless days and weeks, was becoming unbearable. I spent more and more nights crying myself to sleep, not out of fear for Roy's safety, but because I could no longer remember his face. I quarrelled with Mother, grew jealous of Teddy's dependence on her, dropped tears on his head as I helped him into his pajamas while Mother stood silently, rigidly, across the room, folding diapers. Except for the emotions of hopelessness and self pity, I was completely numb. At that point in my life I believe I would have done anything—anything at all—to escape the terrible ennui and numbness. At that point I was still the girl Roy left behind, unable to suffer, to endure, to wait, interested only in recapturing the exhilaration of living each day as if there were no past or future. And so, on a May afternoon in 1945, the wonderful Girl Roy Left Behind rushed eagerly into a situation the dangers of which were apparent to her right from the very beginning.

On this particular afternoon, Ethelyn, Mary Louise and I were sitting in the Elwoods' living room, waiting for the six-o'clock bus that would take Mary Louise and me from Stillwater to our homes in St. Paul. We had been playing bridge with another sorority sister who lived in Stillwater, a girl whose husband worked at Northern Pump and was, therefore, deferred. The other girl had left, and the three of us were sitting there talking about her in nasty accents and feeling pretty sorry for ourselves in general. We were sitting there waiting

for the bus and talking when the front door opened and in walked Bruce.

Bruce is Ethelyn's only brother—nearly ten years older than she, but they had always been very close. He is a small man, slight, very dark, rather sallow (I believe his 4F status in the draft had something to do with a long standing liver disorder). He has one of those tight difficult mouths that suggest a history of encumbering orthodontic appliances. I don't make him sound very attractive, and yet he is very attractive: he has large, gentle, dark eyes, a beautiful smile, and a wonderful gift of listening—really listening, to another person.

He paused in the doorway that afternoon, but he did not smile. "Hi. I didn't know you were having a party." His mouth seemed impossibly tight when he spoke.

"No party. Just us. Come on in and sit down," Ethelyn said.

He hesitated. The folks aren't back yet. He was referring to their parents, who had gone to Kansas City to see Mrs. Elwood's old mother.

"No. Thank God."

Bruce still hesitated in the doorway.

"For God's sake, come on in and sit down. Quit fidgeting. You look awful. Go fix us all a drink or something. What's the matter with you? You really do look awful." He did look awful, as if he were about to burst into tears.

He came in, set down on the edge of a chair in the door, looked questioningly at Mary Louise, whom he had met only once before, then he evidently decided to unload his troubles in spite of us. "Mabel's had a stroke," he said.

Ethelyn, who had been lying on the couch behind the bridge table, her stockings' feet propped against a pillow, sat up abruptly. "My God! . . . So what do you do now?"

"Exactly. . . . Her sister called me this noon from Bridgeport. I guess it's a pretty severe one."

Now, Mabel Archer was Bruce's former mother-in-law. At that time, Bruce was a widower—his wife, Jane, had been

killed in an automobile accident in March of 1944. It was not only a horrible but also a tragic accident, for Jennifer, Bruce and Jane's daughter, was delivered only minutes after Jane had been rushed to a nearby hospital, and just before she died. When Jennifer was three months old Mabel Archer had taken the baby home with her to Connecticut, since Mrs. Elwood maintained that an infant in the household was simply too great a strain on her nerves. Now, it seemed clear, Mabel would no longer be able to care for Jennifer.

"The Lord has certainly seen fit to sock it to you good lately," Ethelyn said.

Bruce shrugged. "Poor Mabel," he said. Then: "Christ I shouldn't have let her take Jennifer in the first place. I should have faced it last year at the time of the big rumpus. She's close to seventy, you know."

"Dear Mother will be pleased. She felt you should have faced it last year too, as you no doubt recall. She'll be so pleased to find her intuitions were so accurate. Another I-told-you-so for dear old Mother."

Mary Louise stood up and wandered out the French doors to the terrace, and I followed her. The conversation was becoming uncomfortably intimate. There was a thin, bedraggled little black kitten on the terrace, and Mary Louise stooped and picked it up.

"I think we ought to slip away," I said.

Mary Louise did not answer me. "I didn't realize Mrs. Elwood was such a stinker," she said. Then, gazing at the cat: "He has sort of Charles Boyer eyes, doesn't he?"

"Who?"

"Well, not the cat, dummy . . . I think he's terribly attractive."

Ethelyn appeared in the doorway then. "Don't run away. Bruce is making a pitcher of martinis. He needs one. I need one. You need one . . . You're not embarrassing us if we're not embarrassing you."

"I don't think we can stay, Ethelyn," I said. "Thanks anyhow. But it's getting late and—"

"Oh, Ruthie, we can stay. Just for one martini. A real quick one. We have time."

"Of course you have. Bruce will take you to the bus."

So we went back inside, Mary Louise carrying the small black kitten. Bruce came in with the pitcher of martinis and Mary Louise sat on the floor, sipping her drink, stroking the kitten and consuming Bruce with her large soft eyes.

"It would be simple if I could find someone reliable to take care of her. But try to find even unreliable help these days," he said.

"Yes. If it weren't for complications, everything would be simple," Ethelyn said bitterly.

We were silent then, drinking our martinis deliberately, hoping that soon they would take effect and relieve the leaden atmosphere in the room. At last Mary Louise looked up at Bruce and said, "Well, what *are* you going to do?"

Bruce smiled sadly at her and shrugged. "Give me time, lady. All I can come up with so far is some kind of temporary foster home."

We were silent again for perhaps a minute before Mary Louise said, "I'll take her."

And when I gasped a little, and Ethelyn snorted, and Bruce raised a mocking eyebrow at her, Mary Louise leaned forward earnestly, clutching the little kitten. "I mean it. I really do. There's plenty of room at home, and Mother wouldn't mind a bit. Two little girls would be fun. Please don't put her in some cold place with strangers."

Bruce lowered his mocking eyebrow. "I believe you are serious," he said.

"Of course I am!"

And she was. I admit my first reaction to her offer was one of shock at the bold, even brash, play she seemed to be making for Bruce. But when I looked down and saw her clutching,

almost desperately, that bedraggled little kitten, I saw also the side of Mary Louise that never ceased to surprise and baffle me: her overwhelming need to harvest and store up love against some loveless emergency. The sight of an unloved or unhappy creature so terrified her that she was compelled, asked or unasked, to construct a warm and safe little nest for the creature—be it child, cat or man. Mary Louise's obsessive fear (and conviction, I've sometimes thought) was that some day she would become a bedraggled and cast-out kitten herself. Whatever hidden motives Mary Louise may have had, her offer to take Jennifer was perfectly sincere. Her mother, being a clergyman's wife and very much in favour of charitable acts, would no doubt have agreed to the plan. And Mary Louise herself would have showered Jennifer with the kind of love the child undoubtedly needed.

"Please, Bruce. Consider it. I'm perfectly sincere," she said.

Then Ethelyn, who had been staring at her incredulously, reached for a cigarette, lit it, inhaled, exhaled and said finally, "That won't be necessary, because I'm going to take her. Bruce, I'm going to quit my job and take her. It makes sense."

"Don't be silly," he said. "You can't quit."

"What do you mean, I can't quit? Of course I can quit! And I'll tell you something else I can do. I can move the hell out of this mahogany morgue we live in. Leave Mama and Papa Zombie to enjoy their nerves in peace. God, it makes me boil! I'm fed up."

"Of course you're fed up. So am I. But it doesn't help to rush off half-cocked like that."

"Who's half-cocked? Mary Louise and the Winterhalters can find a place for Jennifer, but not your own family. Tell me who's half-cocked!"

"I know. But just wait a minute. My apartment has three rooms. We can put Jennifer in the sink and you in the bathtub."

"You can move. Find a bigger place."



"Sweet Sister, there's a housing shortage. No. I'm really very touched by both your offers. You're a couple of terrific kids. I mean it. But neither plan sounds very practical to me."

Mary Louise, who had been listening intently to the conversation between Ethelyn and Bruce, interrupted him. "Well, Bruce, how about this? What if we could find a nice little cottage at some lake that no one can drive to now on account of gas rationing. We could *all* move out there for the summer with our kids. Ruthie too. And then that would give you all summer to find a place for you and Ethelyn and Jennifer in the fall."

Bruce laughed indulgently, but Ethelyn's eyes brightened. "Don't laugh. Mary Louise, you're a genius! That's a marvellous idea. That's just what we're going to do. We really are."

And of course, as it turned out, that's just what we really did.

Well, Mary Louise and I missed our bus for St. Paul that evening, just as I knew we would, and Ethelyn, who was on fire now with her new plans, insisted that we stay for another pitcher of martinis and, finally, dinner. "Bruce has a C card. He'll drive you both home."

Bruce made a cheese souffle, and I made pancakes, and as the evening wore on even Bruce and I began to believe a little in the cottage that no one could get to on account of gas rationing.

After dinner, Mary Louise sat on the floor, sipping her coffee, stroking the little kitten that was now asleep and purring in her lap. "I'm going to take him home," she said. "At least, I hope it's a man cat."

"There's no such thing as a man cat, didn't you know?" Bruce told her, smiling. "Cats reproduce themselves through a kind of highly disciplined Buddhist contemplation."

Mary Louise picked up the cat then and held it under its forepaws like a baby. "Buddhist contemplation!" She brought the cat's nose close to her own nose. "Are you a man? Are you

a man?" she cooed. "I hope you are a man so we can show this silly person cats are like everybody else. Cats are like everybody else and they aren't dull old Buddhists, are they?" Then triumphantly: "It is a man! Look!"

Mary Louise stood up and brought the cat to Bruce. He looked at the designated spot. "I repeat," he said. "I've never seen a man cat or a cat that looks like a man. How can you tell?"

"If you must know, man cats have retractable landing gears," Mary Louise replied, and she sat down on the floor again and laughed with such abandon we all started to laugh. "Isn't that funny?" she said. "When we lived in Winona, an old farmer told me that. I mean how to tell. He told me all kinds of stuff. Shall I go on?"

"Yes. Go on." Bruce was looking at her hard, the look of humour and tenderness with which he had been regarding her all evening, compounded now with a flickering of desire.

Mary Louise must have been used to such looks—her behaviour in front of any man she liked seemed especially designed to call them forth. Yet now meeting Bruce's stare, she blushed a little, looked away from his eyes, got up from the floor and sat on the couch beside him, smoothed her skirts and said, "No. I guess I won't. He was really a peculiar old man. He taught me how to sex chickens too." She stopped and smiled brightly, as if she had brought the conversation safely into harbour.

We all laughed uproariously. "How do you sex chickens? Let's all go get some chickens and have Mary Louise sex them."

But Mary Louise wasn't laughing. "Stop," she said. "I'm a real dodo. I always seem to put my tongue in it."

She meant "foot," of course; and now Bruce was laughing so hard he was gasping and the tears were flooding his eyes—the way people who have been released from a great tension sometimes laugh.

Mary Louise laughed a mild "good sport" laugh. "I think you're all mean," she said.

Bruce, who was sitting on the couch beside her, pulled her to him and gave her a great big pseudo-fatherly hug and pseudo-fatherly kiss on the forehead. "Don't think I'm mean," he said. "'Cause I think you're pretty."

Shortly after that, Bruce drove Mary Louise and me home to St. Paul. I knew he would take me home first. And he did.

One morning, a week later, Mary Louise called me, as excited as a child. She and Bruce had found a perfect cottage—they had actually found a cottage!—at Lake Minnehaha. The news excited me too; but my excitement was dampened a bit by the thought of the ordeal I must go through before the cottage could become a reality for me.

"Mother is going to have ten thousand fits," I said. "But I don't care. After all, I'm twenty-five years old. It's about time I started making a few of my own decisions."

"Of course it is!" Mary Louise bubbled. "Look, I emphasize to her how much Bruce and Jennifer need us. And actually they do. Ethelyn couldn't live out there all alone. My mother thought it was quite lovely of us —after I assured her that none of you smoked." She giggled.

"Oh, I can think of an approach, all right. In fact, I don't even need an approach. I'll simply tell her. As I said, it's about time I grew up."

Nevertheless, I postponed the telling until the next day. It was Saturday, I remember. A beautiful warm May day. The kind of day that makes you feel like sitting on the steps in the sunshine, dozing and musing blissfully and watching the ants run around the sidewalk. I hated to spoil the day with what I knew would be a terrible scene. But the longer I postponed the scene, the more fearsome it became. So along about 11 A.M., after I had finished hanging Teddy's diapers in the morning sunshine (with all the fresh leaves overhead, and the birds, the sound of lawnmowers in the Saturday morning bustle, the smell of fresh cut grass), I went into the house. And still blinded by the whiteness of the diapers I had hung, and the

brilliance of the day, I took a deep breath and called to Mother. "Mama, come and have a second cup of coffee with me. I want to talk to you."

"All rightie," she called. "Just a minute." Then she emerged from the downstairs bathroom, beaming, holding Teddy triumphantly by the hand. "See Nana's boy. See our big good boy, Mommy. He can tinkle all by himself. Nana going to give him a marshmallow." She took the sack of marshmallows from the cupboard and handed one to Teddy, who was looking very pleased and smug.

"Tata," he said.

Mother tooled down to I gave him a big hug. "Oh, you are a good boy. You're Sam's big good smart boy!" Then to me: "Honestly, Ruthie, that's the *smartest* thing. Think of that. Sixteen months old and he says tata without even being reminded. And it won't be long before we have dry pants too. Teddy going to tell Sam every time he have to tinkle, aren't you, sweetie pie?"

But Teddy was wandering out the back door now with his marshmallow to join Dad and the tomato plants in the garden. Mother opened the kitchen window and called to Dad, "Sam! Here comes Teddy. Keep an eye on him, dear. See if that gate is hooked."

Then she returned to the table where I was sitting, sighed, as if she had been hurrying all morning, and sat down. "Just what I need. A cup of coffee. Do you want a doughnut?"

"No."

"I shouldn't, either. I guess I won't." She craned her neck so she could see out the window. "Honestly, Ruthie. Look at him out there. Helping Grandpa. Isn't that adorable? I'd love a picture of that."

"Mama, listen." My stomach turned over once or twice, but I plunged right in. "I've been meaning to discuss this with you for the last few days, but I thought I'd wait until it was definite. Mary Louise and Ethelyn and I have been thinking

of spending the summer at the lake. And now we've found a cottage at Lake Minnehaha. For the season. Very reasonable. And I understand very nice. I haven't seen it yet. We're going to move in the first of June." There. I'd said it. I'd said all the necessary things. Now all I could do was wait.

"What?" she said. "Who? What do you mean?"

I told her briefly, but with some detail, exactly how and when and why the idea had first occurred to us. "And now," I concluded, "Mary Louise has found this cottage for only a hundred and fifty dollars for the season. Which is reasonable, you must admit."

"A hundred and fifty for the season! That must be some cottage! Have you seen it?"

"No. I said I hadn't seen it yet. But Mary Louise described it to me. It's on top of a little hill that slopes right down to the lake without crossing any roads or paths or anything. And there's a nice little sandy beach and a dock. And the cottage itself sounds marvellous. You see, these people—their name is Digby, the ones that own it, they live in Bayport—well, they built one big room first. Shaped like an octagon. And with a nice big fireplace. And then they planned to add on four wings, on each part of the octagon, sort of, leaving room for windows and doors, if you see what I mean. Fireplace on one wall, front door on one wall, windows on two walls and that leaves four walls with a wing opening off each wall, if you see what I mean. I think I can just picture it, the way Mary Louise described it."

"Ruthie. Quit rattling on that way. What you're trying to say is that you plan to take Teddy and go out to this—*place*—and spend the summer. Use up three months' allowance, and of course it will be a good deal more than that before you're through, for a little summer vacation for yourself."

"Just a minute, Mama. Please. Let me tell my whole story before you get mad."

"I'm not getting mad. I don't intend to get mad. After all, you're a grown woman. It's your money. It's your life."

I plunged on. "The reason it's so cheap is this: The one room the Digbys built is beautifully constructed and so on, but they never got around to the wings. I mean, they couldn't afford it. So they got four old streetcars and attached them on for wings and fixed them all up and painted them real cute and so on." I wasn't sure of the fixing up and painting, but I could just imagine how quaint and attractive it *could* be. "And so we'll have three bedrooms, which is unusual in a cottage that cheap. And the fourth streetcar is the kitchen. Electricity, of course." I went on "And a pump right outside the back door. And only a mile to the village. Easy walking distance."

"I should say so," Mother put in sarcastically. "Especially with three heavy babies to carry. Where's the bathroom?"

"It's outside, of course. There's no running water."

"Oh, Ruthie! For heaven's sake! I'd think you'd have more sense! How, exactly, do you plan to handle the laundry for three babies with no running water? And without a car! You can't manage out there with three babies, a mile from the village, and no car. Good Lord! Will you tell me exactly what in the world is the matter with you? I mean it. I try to tell me exactly why you are so restless and discontented when Dad and I have done everything in our power to make this admittedly hard time for you as easy as possible."

I didn't reply for a minute, and she remained silent too. Finally I said, "I'll try to, if you'll listen."

"Of course I'll listen. I'd certainly be interested in hearing why anyone in her right mind would wilfully, on purpose, leave a pleasant cool house with a nice yard, a car at her disposal, a permanent nursemaid (which is what I've become, you know), all the comforts and conveniences possible for a young woman with a baby to have. And all *free*, mind you. Yes, I'd certainly like to hear why you would prefer a stuffy little shack

at Lake Minnehaha. And you *know* it can't be more than a shack at that price!"

"Mama. That's just the point. Just the point. I shouldn't be getting all this free. I shouldn't be—"

"Well, if that's all that's bothering you, I'm sure your father could be persuaded to accept board and room from you."

"No, no. It would be a farce. I could never in a million years pay enough to cover what I get here. It's not the money. It's the whole way of life. It's not right. I'm still a daughter. I'm not a wife or a mother. I feel just the way I used to when I was in college. I don't even feel as if Teddy is really mine. I feel as if he belonged to you. You decide about his toilet training and buy clothes for him, and he always goes to you with things. He even calls Nana when he wakes up in the morning. Can't you see what I mean? It's not your fault. It's nothing you've done or left undone. It's just—"

"Listen, my dear," she interrupted. "He calls Nana in the morning because Mommy doesn't hear him. Mommy doesn't get up. I'll keep hands off if that's what you want. I'd love to keep hands off. I'd love to stay in bed in the mornings. I'm getting too old to put in sixteen-hour days. Sometimes my back aches so at night after a day lugging that heavy child around that I could scream. But I do it because I love him and because I love you." Her eyes were filling with tears now. And so were mine. I stood up, lit the fire under the coffee again, regained my composure a little. She was biting hard at her lips to keep from crying.

"Mama, can you understand this? I haven't seen my husband for almost two years now. Can you see how after months and months of living here, just marking time, being in the same environment I was in when I was a little girl, can you see how after a while I might get to feeling sort of unreal? You know, most of the time now I can't remember what Roy looks like. I mean, I can't picture his face if I try to. And this is the worst: I absolutely can't picture what it will be like when he comes

home. I can't imagine that day. I can imagine staying here forever, and it terrifies me. I can imagine staying on and on here forever and never really living my life. I want to live my life, start right now, before I lose the will to. And I *am* losing the will to. If I stay here any longer I won't care if he never comes home. And when he does come home, I won't want to upset my nice life here. I'll be so used to the nice life. And so will Teddy. Mama, if you could only understand all that, you wouldn't be hurt. You'd see it didn't have anything to do with you or Dad. It's just that I've got to start living my life—*our* life, Roy's and mine—or pretty soon I won't have any desire to live that life. I'll be too coddled and comfortable—and numb."

Mother stared at me a moment, her eyes brimming; then she put her head down on her arms and cried. "Ruthie, Ruthie baby, you break my heart." She was talking between little sobs and throat spasms. "You're so young and foolish. Two years, darling, two years, and you think it's a lifetime! How can I tell you . . . any of it."

Her sobs diminished gradually, and I just sat there staring into space and waiting, thinking of nothing in particular. At last she looked up, fumbled for a handkerchief, wiped her eyes and blew her nose. "Go," she said, trying to smile. "Of course you can go if you want to. I can even see why you want to. And if it's horrible out there and if you don't like it, you can come back home, too. All I want is your happiness, and I feel so sorry for you poor kids I could . . ." Her lips trembled again, but she regained control of them. It was my turn to cry now, and she came over and hugged me and stroked my hair. "Run upstairs now and wash your face."

And in the end it was she who told Dad about the lake plans. "I think the girls are doing a perfectly wonderful thing for Bruce," she told him.

Well, Bruce did all our moving for us, knocked-down cribs and potty chairs, suitcases and cartons of books and records, letters and trinkets, stuffed animals and diapers, and diaper



pails, cases of baby food, bottles and bottle brushes and hair-brushes and hair dryers and a portable record player. He made three trips: the first with Mary Louise and Susan, the second with Ethelyn and Jennifer, and finally Teddy and me.

When we arrived at the lake at five o'clock in the afternoon, a kind of green-and-amber, somnolent, bird-filled haze hung over everything. The lake smell was intoxicating, and there was the pump!—completely charming, with its old blue enamel cup hanging from a hook. And shading the pump and the kitchen door was a magnificent oak tree! I could see from the foliage that there would be hollyhocks in the back yard, and there was a twisted old apple tree beyond the oak tree that would have delighted the children had they been three or four years older and ready for tree climbing.

Mary Louise came running out the back door. "Oh come and see, come and see, it's so enchanting!" Her eyes were dizzy with excitement. "I haven't done a thing yet except sit here and gloat."

But with the appearance of Mary Louise and her rose-coloured glasses, my own rose-coloured glasses began to slip down on my nose, so to speak. In the first place, the cottage seemed to be located about a hundred feet off a well-travelled country road. I had been told this, but somehow I had expected the road to be a country lane, overgrown with field daisies, butter-and-eggs and Queen Anne's lace. A short gravel driveway turned off the road to the cottage—which was not quite a cottage, but still not quite a shack either. The Dighys had not used their imaginations about the streetcars. Here they stood—all four of them—grey and peeling. I noticed right away that some of the little screens on the streetcar windows were in need of repair. "Oh! This is wonderful!" I said. And we all went inside.

The octagonal centre was a big room with a large window that looked out on the lake. No fireplace. Why had I thought there would be a fireplace? I wondered. The room was furnished entirely with rocking chairs: two big square ones, two

white wicker ones, and one little armless one with a cretonne-covered cushion on its seat. There was a large square brown table—library table, I think they used to be called—two bridge lamps, several smoking stands and a huge picture of a St. Bernard dog rescuing a little child from the waves. In one corner of the room was a long sawbuck table covered with oil-cloth and flanked by two benches

The kitchen streetcar contained a two-burner electric plate, a small electric refrigerator, a dry sink, an oilcloth-covered card table and some long open shelves. On the shelves were assorted peanut butter glasses, assorted plates and cups and bowls, a box of slightly blackened, slightly bent silverware, about eighteen oblong vegetable dishes, a meagre collection of pots and pans, and a large blue enamel coffee-pot

One of the bedroom streetcars contained an old white iron bedstead with brass knobs (Mary Louise had put her things in this room) In the other two bedrooms were just ordinary brown metal beds. Each room contained a chest of drawers and a cardboard wardrobe—and room for a crib

Bruce must have seen my determined smile, because he said, half apologetically, as he carried our third load of equipment in at the back door, "The Diggins aren't much for frills, as you can see"

"Oh, you don't want frills in a lake cottage," I said, too enthusiastically "This place will be a dream as far as housekeeping goes. No rugs. No bathroom to scout every day. I like it, Bruce. I really do. I think it's going to be perfect for us."

"Of course it is! It's marvellous!" Mary Louise flung out her arms. "I love it. I love all of you. I love everything"

"You're exaggerating again," Bruce chided her. "Remember what I told you" Then he took her in his arms, right in front of me, and kissed her, exactly as if they were perfectly respectable newlyweds.

Well, I must admit my spirits reached the depths before that first night was over. Imagine trying to get three babies (ranging

in age from fifteen to seventeen months old) fed, bathed and bedded down in a cottage with no running water, a two-burner hot plate, and walls that might just as well have been made of tissue paper. Jennifer cried until nearly eleven o'clock, and Teddy, although he did not join her, remained awake, sucking his thumb and chanting mournfully, "Where Nana, Ma?" Susan, of course, fell asleep almost at once, freeing Mary Louise to spend the evening on Bruce's lap. (Is there anything in the world more uncomfortable than being in the same room with a couple who are blatantly attracted to each other?) We had martinis and tomato soup for dinner, and at midnight it began to rain. After a damp trip to the outhouse at 1 A.M. I fell asleep, my pillow damp with tears and the bottom of my blanket damp with rain that dripped slowly through a leak in the roof.

But in the morning the sun was shining brightly. The air was fresh and tangy; everything green glistened; and all the birds were singing. Bruce, who had spent the night on an air mattress in the living room, spent the day repairing the roof and the screens. We bought lime for the outhouse, hammered down protruding rusty nails on the dock, arranged our gear in drawers and cupboards. Teddy actually took a nap that afternoon, and I was able to lie on the jetty in the warm sun, staring through the cracks at the minnows that scooted about in the shallow water. And from that moment on (for the next five or six weeks, that is) our life at Lake Minnehaha became, surprisingly enough, the idyll we had hoped it would be.

I made yellow curtains for the cottage, and the sun came flooding through them and completely transformed the gloomy raw-wood interior. Mary Louise made a very satisfactory cocktail table out of the St. Bernard rescuing the child; at least, it would have been very satisfactory if Bruce had refrained from remarking on Mary Louise's inspiration every time he put a pitcher of martinis on top of the St. Bernard. Ethelyn tacked Toulouse-Lautrec posters all over the living-room walls, and every day she filled the bean crocks she had

brought with her from Stillwater with interesting branches and wild flowers which she picked on her daily afternoon walks with Jennifer.

In fact, Ethelyn became, almost overnight, a person whom I, at least, had never known. Bruce maintained that she had been this cheerful, energetic, almost bubbling creature in the months after her marriage to Phil and before his departure for overseas. She drank no more than the rest of us now and made sharp remarks only when Bruce and Mary Louise behaved too fatuously. And she was the most conscientious mother I've ever seen. Mary Louise and I had a tendency to lie in bed in the morning and let our children roam around in wet diapers, eating graham crackers. But not Ethelyn. She was up at six, cooking oatmeal and chattering away at Jennifer. Jennifer had a water bath and a sun bath every morning. She was in bed promptly for her naps and for the night. She was taken for a walk in her stroller every afternoon—all done up in a freshly ironed dress, her hair brushed into glossy ringlets. She was rocked and sung to every evening. Jennifer would snuggle against Ethelyn's shoulder, drowsy, sucking her thumb, and Ethelyn would sing "Old Man Mose" or "The Hut-Sut Song" to her. And the expression of contentment on both their faces was enough to make you cry.

Yes, those weeks would have been truly idyllic had it not been for the love affair between Mary Louise and Bruce. Exactly when their relationship became something more than talk and kisses, I don't know. Ethelyn maintained they had sampled the beds before we moved in, but I find this very hard to believe. After all, Bruce had a great deal of sensitivity and integrity and was not the kind of man to take lightly the seduction of another man's wife—especially a serviceman's wife. On the other hand, as Ethelyn said, he was not St. Anthony. Mary Louise used to sit on his lap in her wet bathing suit, share a bottle of beer with him, smoke his cigarette, tease him with her exaggerations and lies, then laugh that voluptuous,

abandoned laugh of hers that belonged more properly to a two-year-old than to a twenty-five-year-old. Bruce spent every weekend with us, and long before the end of June it was understood that Ethelyn and I would clear out of the house on Saturday evening, leaving Bruce and Mary Louise to sit with the children. Bruce would toss us the keys to his car after dinner, and Ethelyn and I would take off for the movies. Or for the village, where the stores remained open until ten on Saturday evenings. Or for a little tavern on the opposite shore of Lake Minnehaha, where we would sit and drink beer and play the jukebox and occasionally chat or dance with the habitués. In fact, significantly enough, it was in this tavern on one of those Saturday evenings that I met Jerry Gates.

I cannot understand, even to this day, how Ethelyn could have accused me of being naive in regard to love, both marital and extramarital. Had she forgotten completely all the things we went through together that summer? She knew about Roy and Jo, she knew about Jerry Gates and me—and we discussed endlessly, it seemed to me, the dangerous waters in which Bruce and Mary Louise were swimming. As I recall, we had agreed on every single aspect of that sad affair (that “sordid affair” she had called it then). How she could have accused me of knowing nothing about the relationships that can and do develop between men and women, both married and unmarried, is something I will never understand. As I recall, it was *Ethelyn* who was not equal to the situation when, on the Fourth of July, Mary Louise, appropriately enough, exploded a firecracker in our midst.

Usually the last one out of bed, usually masticulate in the morning, groping for her coffee, murmuring incoherently to the babies, Mary Louise was up at six on the Fourth of July. She stuck her head in my room at seven and said, “Pancakes this morning. Get up, Ruthie dear. It’s the Fourth of July.” And, indeed, it sounded like it: she had put one of Teddy’s

records, "The Stars and Stripes Forever," on the record player. I was so bewildered that I got up.

Mary Louise had the table set and was frying bacon and singing parodied words along with the record: "Be kind to our fine feathered friends, be kind to our web-footed brothers . . ."

"What got into her?" I asked Ethelyn. Mary Louise's morning personality had become a myth.

Ethelyn shrugged. "Who knows? She won't say until we've eaten her pancakes."

"I certainly won't. I like ceremony," Mary Louise said.

So we ate her pancakes and Mary Louise was so excited that her cheeks were flushed. When we had finished she passed us cigarettes, poured us each a second cup of coffee and said, "Now!"

"Yes, now. Hurry up," I said.

"All right," she replied. "Bruce and I are going to be married."

Ethelyn put down her spoon and stared at her in silent disbelief. "There's just one little thing, dear heart," she said at last. "You're already married."

Mary Louise laughed nervously and continued out of breath already. "Yes, I know. Only Ruthie wanted me to hurry up, so I got right to the point. There's lots that comes before and lots that comes after."

"I can imagine," Ethelyn said dryly.

"Oh, honey, don't be mad. Don't get nasty with me. Please. Just listen. This was dumb. It was dumb to tell you like this, but I didn't know how to say it, really. It's sort of awful, you know. If you look at it in a certain way, it's even immoral. But it isn't like that at all. I mean, words make things be so different. Don't you think they do? I mean unreal and not the way things are at all?"

Ethelyn didn't answer, so I said, "They do. I know what you mean."

She turned to me gratefully. "Ruthie, I'm in love with him, and he loves me, and I never even knew what it was all about before. Ruthie, I'm in a helluva mess, aren't I?"

I could see now that her gaiety and excitement were hysteria, not high spirits.

Ethelyn said, "You *are* in a helluva mess, Mary Louise. If you realize it, fine. But this little celebration wouldn't seem to indicate you realized it. You don't get up and sing and make pancakes when you realize you're in a helluva mess."

I was a little impatient with Ethelyn. "Yes you do. If you're a certain kind of person," I said. "Hadh't she ever heard of a wake turning into a hilarious drunken party? 'I let's jst both of us be quiet and listen to Mary Louise'."

So Mary Louise began her story, some of which I knew, some of which Ethelyn knew, and some of which neither one of us had known. Mary Louise had met Don Mabry in June, 1943, while visiting her sister, Meg, in Texas. He was big, handsome, bluff, hearty, a former car salesman, a man of huge appetites and a violent temper. But there was something almost little-boyish about him too, according to Mary Louise. "Do you know why I married him?" she asked. "Because he didn't have any relatives. He didn't have anybody to care if he lived or died. He's been on his own since he was seventeen, you know."

Don was a lieutenant in one of the armoured divisions that were training in Texas, and his personality as described by Mary Louise (neither Ethelyn nor I had met him at that time) seemed to fit the stereotype of armoured division personnel: rough, tough, proud, boisterous, courageous—a miniature General Patton. Inspired by the war, Texas, the Tank Corps, the precariousness of life—who knows what else—and absolutely inundated by the strength of Don's personality, Mary Louise had married him a month after their initial meeting. Two months later, she discovered she was pregnant. Three months later, he left the country for the ETO.

**"I don't even know him," Mary Louise was crying quietly now. "Ruthie, you keep talking about forgetting Roy's face, and how he seems unreal. What if you didn't even know him in the first place? All we ever did was drink and dance and go to bed. And when I tried to talk, he'd shut me up by kissing me. He'd say, 'Shut up, beautiful. My mind's on lower things.' He's real vulgar."**

Ethelyn laughed harshly, and Mary Louise blushed, swallowed hard, and continued, **"All I know is that I'm in love with Bruce, and I've never been in love before. He's the finest person I've ever known. For the first time in my life I feel like a whole human being instead of a chopped up handful of miscellaneous things. Bruce talks to me—he tells me what he's thinking and feeling. And he listens to me. I mean, to me. Me, myself."**

**"And gives you Emerson's essays to read," Ethelyn put in.**

But Mary Louise ignored her. She dipped her napkin in a glass of water, leaned over and wiped the jelly off Susan's fingers. Then she continued, **"I know it's going to take courage, a terrible lot of courage, to do what I have to do. I feel sorry for Don, but it's not the way it would be with either one of you. You're in love. I'm not going to write him a 'Dear John' letter either. Bruce thinks that would be awful. Instead, the very first day he gets home I'm going to tell him. I think I can make him understand."**

When neither of us replied, Mary Louise said, **"You know, it would be much easier not to do this at all. I could so easily just drift along. But that would be dishonest and false and morally wrong. As Bruce says, sometimes it's immoral to be kind."**

I had never heard Mary Louise talk like this before. She no longer sounded like a little girl trying to charm and smile her way through life, trying to convince herself that every day was a birthday party with pink icing on the cake. Mary Louise, sitting at the table in her ruffly little midriff and romper-type



shorts, her beautiful fair hair hanging to her shoulders like Alice in Wonderland, for the first time in her life looked like a woman. I confess, at that moment I felt only respect, affection and concern for her. "You'll find the courage, Mary Louise," I said, and smiled at her.

"Oh, thank you, Ruthie," she said, her eyes filling with tears. She turned, tentatively, to include Ethelyn in her smile.

But Ethelyn would not smile. Instead she stood up, pushed her chair away from the table and left the room, whistling sarcastically the theme song of a popular radio soap opera.

The very next day (almost as if it were another episode in the soap opera) I received the four letters from Roy that were to alter so drastically the mood of the summer—in retrospect, I might say the mood of our marriage! They were the first letters I had received in over a week, and I took them joyously, along with Teddy, a cup of coffee and a package of cigarettes, down to the jetty, where I could sit by myself in the warm sunshine and savour them to the full. I arranged them, as I always did, in chronological order. Roy was still stationed in India at that time, a ground officer with the AIC. The only immediate threat to his life—as far as I could tell, was death from boredom. During the spring his letters had become more and more the kind of letters I longed for: epistles about me and the son he had never seen, poems to our past and auguries of a glorious future for us. He seldom mentioned India any more. He was lonesome and bored and seemed to be living in the past and the future simultaneously. His present was simply to be endured, and I felt closer to him than I had at any time since his departure.

But this batch of letters was quite different. "Darling—" the first letter began, and I noticed right away that the salutation was mild, compared to the ones I had been receiving. And it went on: "It's not Easter, and I'm not Jesus Christ, but I've been resurrected!" He went on to say that he had gone one day with some other officers to the estate of a Mr. Browning, a

British civil servant—the kind you read about in books, that have their careers in India, raise their families there, send their children back to England to go to school. Mr. Browning had, in addition to tennis courts and a great deal of gin and good humour, four lovely daughters, one of whom was named Josephine. Jo, it seemed, was the least pretty of the four, which is why, Roy supposed, she had been allocated to him instead of to one of the three fly boys who had accompanied him. But never judge a book by its cover. Jo was the only one of the four that had anything approaching womanly poise (the other three giggled). And she was writing a novel about her girlhood in India and was, all in all, a very nice and solid little gal for her nineteen years. In fact, she reminded him of me in many ways.

At any rate, they had had a fine day, all of them, and they had all been invited to come back the following Saturday night. The Brownings had returned him to civilization. More than that, they had returned him to life. He could see, hear, smell again—And he loved me very much. Signed, Roy. P.S.: “The Brownings have a pool. Also, you don’t have to chase your own tennis balls. They provide bearers for that purpose.”

My hands were shaking a little as I opened the next letter. Now they had all gone to Calcutta for the weekend, with Mrs. Browning acting as a kind of mother superior, although actually she was really a very good job. And they had encountered a good jazz piano player. In Calcutta! And Mrs. Browning and Jo had helped him pick out a suit for me, which he hoped I would like. And so on and so on through all four letters. He was glad that I too had been resurrected—the cottage sounded fine—just what I needed. And would I (very soon, if possible) send him his “Pumpkin Face” manuscript. “The Pumpkin Face” was the novel he had worked on during the first months of our marriage, a piece of writing I had always regarded as belonging at least partially to me.

There was no reason, I told myself, why Roy shouldn’t be

enjoying himself, in his own way, in the present, just as I had been for almost six weeks now. You can't make a permanent home of Limbo, after all. There was no reason—absolutely no reason—why I should have become, first, so agitated that my heart actually began to pound in my chest, and then so depressed that I found it impossible to write to Roy until the following Sunday. The stage was beautifully set, now, for the events of the weekend.

Bruce came out, as usual, on Saturday, although this particular week he arrived late — just in time for the cocktail hour, in fact. It was the first time we had seen him since Mary Louise's Fourth of July announcement. At any rate, he came loping in the back door, whistling ostentatiously, his arms full of packages: gin and vermouth and fancy olives, smoked oysters and cheese, and steak! Nearly four pounds of sirloin steak! He pulled lollipops from his ears for the children, cigarettes from his pockets for us. Then he swept Mary Louise into his arms and kissed her so hard she squealed.

I was a little embarrassed by all these signs of impending festivity, but Ethelyn was downright angry. "A little engagement party perhaps?" she asked in a nasty tone of voice.

Bruce looked hurt. "Well, I hadn't thought of it in quite that way. Just steak. I think you gals deserve a little treat now and then."

But Ethelyn was determined to quarrel with him. She informed him that we had already had a little engagement party — "a modest little affair with pancakes. If we'd known you had connections to get steak we would have postponed it, I'm sure."

This, of course, irritated Bruce, and they quarrelled then, very fluently, logically and heatedly, about steak, the black market, the war effort, sacrifice and self-indulgence and, finally, decadence, utter decadence.

"Oh, calm down, Ethelyn," Bruce said at last. "I didn't expect your blessing. You're entitled to your opinions and even

to the expression of them. But for God's sake, calm down. You sound like Savonarola."

Ethelyn didn't reply.

Then Mary Louise—poor Mary Louise—said, to break the gathering silence, "Who is Savonarola?"

Ethelyn let Mary Louise's question vibrate in the silence for a moment. Then—her timing as expert as if she were being directed in a play—she picked up Bruce's car keys, which were lying on the table, and said, "Come on, Ruthie. Before I vomit."

"Where are you going?" Mary Louise's eyes were filling with tears.

"We're going out for a little Spam dinner."

And I went with her because there was really nothing else I could do.

We drove to the village, stopping at the Blue Goose for hamburgers. Ethelyn ranted and raved and scarcely touched the meal. "Jesus God, how can you go wading into a mess like that with your eyes tight shut? He's as bad as she is now. Worse. Because he has a brain inside his skull, instead of a tennis ball. . . . God, his laughable little crusade to get her to stop lying!"

"She doesn't lie, Ethelyn."

"She certainly doesn't tell the truth, does she? That's lying, isn't it? Talk about corruption! He's just as bad as she is on that score now." She changed her voice to a breathy falsetto. "Darling, just close your eyes real tight and wish. Now open them. See, we're in fairyland!" Her voice returned to normal. "Ugh! I can't eat. It really makes me that sick."

After dinner we went to the movies. Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall in *I O Have and Have Not*. Something in the movie—I can't remember what—brought tears to my eyes; and I found, suddenly and inexplicably, that I could not stop weeping, even after the movie had ended, even after we had left the theatre and were walking down the street toward the car.

"What's the matter, Ruthie?" Ethelyn asked, when we had reached the car. "The movie wasn't that sad."

"I don't know."

"You've seemed sort of down for a couple of days. Ever since your last batch of letters, in fact. What cooks?"

Now the tears really poured down my cheeks, and I tried to laugh a little and stop them. Finally I managed to say, "Let's go to Jimmy's and take down our hair. Drive around a little until I stop bawling."

Jimmy's was the tavern I have mentioned before—a big, rickety, barnlike place smelling of raw wood, beer and cigarette smoke—the kind of Minnesota tavern that also rents boats and sells bait. We made our way to a back booth and ordered beer, and I began the story of Jo and Roy. When I reached the part about the Pumpkin Face manuscript, I found my eyes were full of tears again. I cleared my throat several times but was unable to continue. "I'm crazy, I guess. I'll be all right in a minute."

"You're not crazy, Ruthie. I'd be madly jealous too. I know I would. And with absolutely no reason. I can see it in your case. You haven't anything to be jealous about. And yet I know I'd react the same way."

I felt better, wiped my eyes and continued my story. But Ethelyn wasn't listening now. She interrupted me shortly: "Jealousy, of course, is another one of my little congenital difficulties—like pessimism. Ruthie, do you know what was getting me tonight? I'm jealous. I'm jealous of Mary Louise. I've had Bruce to myself ever since Jane died, you know, and I don't know what I would have done without him this year. I've always adored that guy. He's been everything to me, ever since I was a little girl. And now suddenly I have to share him. With a goose. I don't know why I didn't mind Jane so much. Maybe she was more worthy of him. Or maybe it was because I had Phil. Everything was nice and normal then. It's all sordid and nasty now."

She was silent for a long time. Finally she sighed and smiled. "It's really none of my damned business what they do, is it?"

"No, it isn't," I replied. I was a little annoyed with her for refusing to listen to me.

"If I can bring myself to apologize, I'm going to. And then I'm going to shut up and mind my own business. It's their affair; they're adults. I'm going to suspend judgment from now on. We were silent for some time. Then Ethelyn looked up and said, "Ruthie, do you think Roy and Phil will ever come home?"

Her question sent a cold chill over me. But before I could reply the waitress appeared suddenly with two more beers.

"What's this?" I asked. "We didn't order this."

"Compliments of the captain over there," she said, nodding her head toward the bar.

I looked questioningly at Ethelyn. I didn't feel in the mood for light banter and a dance or two to the jukebox, which was the customary payment for free beer at Jimmy's. At least, the way we played the game. And she certainly didn't seem to be in a dancing mood either. But she said to the waitress, "Tell him thank you very much." Then to me: "He's stoop-shouldered and has nice sad eyes." Ethelyn was seated so she could see the bar.

"O.K. You dance with him, then," I said. "I couldn't dance, or even smile, tonight if you paid me."

But as it turned out Jerry Gates was no more interested in dancing than we were. Before long he appeared at our booth. He was tall and very thin. His movements were awkward, jerky; one almost expected to see mechanical robotlike joints in his shoulders, elbows, wrists, knees. He had thin, dun-coloured hair and his uniform was baggy looking and badly in need of a press. But Ethelyn was right about his eyes: they were sad, deep blue eyes, sad and intelligent, questioning, hesitant, humorous, intense. After five minutes of conversation with him, they were the only thing about Jerry Gates that you no-

ticed. They were magnetic, in the literal sense of the word: he drew your eyes to his own, then held them there, and you had to give a little tug to break the current.

"You ladies look as if you could use another beer to cry in. May I join you?"

"Please do," Ethelyn said. "Tell us your shaggy-dog story right away. We need cheering up. As a matter of fact, we *were* crying in our beer."

But Jerry Gates did not smile. "I know it. I saw you."

He introduced himself, then. It seems he was a P-38 pilot, had been with the Eighth Air Force in England, had been shot down over Germany, had been a prisoner for ten months, had been liberated in May and returned home to Chicago for a recuperative leave. But Chicago, and all it contained in the way of wife, home, peace, good old American apple pie and ice cream, had turned out to be something less than the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. So here he was—courtesy of some fellow he had met in a bar, a newspaperman with a defective gall bladder and a warm heart—spending his leave in a shack on the south shore of Lake Minnehaha.

"You mean this perfect stranger you met in a bar just gave you the key to his cottage and told you to spend your leave there?"

"Yes. A kindly ex-Minnesotan. A fine race of people. You ladies are Minnesotans? I x Minnesotans? What?"

"Minnesotans, yes," I said.

"A fine, warmhearted people. You can't beat a Minnesotan for pure heart. Or a newspaperman. Unbeatable combination. But tell me, why do all Minnesotans go to Chicago? That seems like a very stupid thing for them to do. To leave God's country and go to a stinking town like Chicago." He was a little tight, but trying hard to inaugurate some kind of meaningful conversation instead of the usual light banter. He seemed terribly lonely.

"The only other place for a Minnesotan to go is to North

Dakota. Does that answer your question?" Ethelyn replied.

"No, it doesn't. Why go any place?"

"Sometimes North Dakota starts breathing down your neck."

He laughed. "Oh my God, you're a funny one! Gracious living in Chicago, Illinois! Is that it?"

"Is Chicago your home?" I asked. "I mean, were you born there?"

"I should say not! Chicago is my vice—not my home. I start out for Oregon and before I know it I'm back in Chicago, riding the goddamned Wilson local again. Or New Orleans. I went to New Orleans once, and the company I worked for transferred me right back to Chicago—at my request, of course."

"I don't understand," I said. "First you say you hate it, then you say you asked to be transferred back there."

"I said it was my vice. When I'm away from Chicago, I think of nothing but Chicago. I could even outdo Carl Sandburg on Chicago when I'm away from Chicago. The minute I get back, I start kicking myself. It's a big hick town, full of a bunch of jerks. There's always some damned cinder blowing in your eye. You wake up in the morning and blow your nose and you'd think you'd spent the night in a coal mine."

He stopped. He looked as if he were going to cry.

"So where is your home? I thought I asked."

He cleared his throat and smiled. "In a shack on the south shore of Lake Minnehaha. If you want to know where my wife lives, she lives near the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago."

"Tell us about her," Ethelyn said.

I was a little appalled that she should ask him such a personal question. But he seemed quite willing, even eager, to tell her. "You've heard about 'Dear John' letters," he said. "Well, I got a 'Dear John, welcome home in person.'" And he went on to tell us some of the details of his welcome. His wife, he said, was running her own private USO right there in the shadow of the Moody Bible Institute.



"How long had you been married when you left?" Ethelyn asked him.

"Eight months. Why?"

"We have a friend who, right at this moment, is plotting just such a welcome home for her husband. They were only married four months, however."

"No kidding! What's the set-up? Can you tell me, for the love of God, what the set-up is?"

So Ethelyn told him her version of the set-up, and I told him my version of the set-up. He ordered another round of beer for all of us. And before long the three of us seemed like old, old friends.

When we had finished our third beer he addressed me. "All right, Miss Post Toasties of 1945, tell me *your* troubles now."

"Why do you call me that?" I asked in dismay.

"Because that's what you look like. I attribute my bloom to a big bowl of Post Toasties every morning. Try them with cream and sugar and some kind of fruit. Why were you crying in your beer?"

I really had no intention of telling him, but little by little, in spite of myself, I told him the whole story. I went even further: I showed Roy's letters to him. I had ventured the opinion, at the conclusion of my tale, that I was probably being kind of silly about it all. And he had replied, "Of course, I haven't seen the letters, but if you're reporting accurately I'd say you were not only silly but a damned little fool to boot." Now, it's annoying to be called a damned little fool, and I opened my purse. "Here. Read them." I handed him the four letters.

He hesitated, embarrassed.

"Go on," I insisted, wanting him to read the letters for himself and *then* call me a damned little fool. "Go on. There's nothing personal in them, God knows."

So Jerry took the letters and read them straight through while Ethelyn and I went to the ladies' room. When we returned, he said, "Ruthie, you ought to be very proud of these

letters. They're a tribute not only to your husband but to you."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, do you think any man would be nuts enough to write letters like these to a woman he didn't love? Do you think he'd tell you all about this gal if he were really involved with her? Do you see what I mean?"

I shrugged.

He shook his head. "Baby, you've got an awful lot to learn about love," he said. "You want a hunk to come home to you instead of a man?" Now his eyes had hold of mine, and I had to wrench them away. He fumbled in his pockets for cigarettes, passed them to Ethelyn and to me. "The day you stop getting letters like these, then you can start to worry."

After that he asked Ethelyn to dance. I was little hurt because he hadn't asked me to dance. I had grown very fond of him in a few hours. But before we left he put his arm around my shoulders. "Listen, Post-Boasties, get wise fast. The next time I see you I want your eyes to match the rest of your face."

On Tuesday of the following week I met Jerry Gates again. I was walking along the asphalt road that ran behind our cottage, on my way to pick up our weekly supply of garden vegetables from a nearby truck farmer, when an old 1935 Plymouth drew up alongside me and a man leaned out. "Let me see your eyes," he yelled.

I was nonplussed until I recognized him. "Oh, hi!" I walked over to the car. "No tears," I said. "See."

He looked. And I had to jerk my eyes away from his again. "That little talking to did me a lot of good the other night," I said nervously. "I want to thank you."

He looked at me in silence for a long moment, then he said in mock-polite tones, "Oh, that's quite all right, I'm sure. The pleasure was all mine."

"Really," I protested. "I was working myself into a jealous fit, and you snapped me out of it. You know how jealousy gets going inside you, and pretty soon it's taken over your whole

insides, and you can't think about anything else. It was just what I needed, to have a complete stranger—a man—come along and tell me I was being silly. Being a damned little fool," I amended.

"Where are you going?" he asked. "Get in. I'll give you a lift."

I hesitated. I didn't know Jerry Gates—really. It was one thing to sit in Jimmy's place with him. It was quite another to get in a car with him. When it came right down to it, he was really nothing more than a pickup.

He was smiling at me mockingly now. "Your mother told you never to get in cars with strange men, didn't she? And what am I but a strange man? Really, when it comes right down to it, a pickup, which is worse."

I must have blushed, because he laughed indulgently now; he opened the car door, and I got in.

We picked up our vegetables at the truck farm. Then we drove to the village, where Jerry bought some magazines. "I need a few Luce publications to dilute the Proust."

"Proust! Are you reading Proust?" Somehow he didn't seem to be the kind of man who would read Proust—he was so casual, slangy, even unkempt.

"I also read Trollope," he replied, grinning at me.

"Well, for heaven's sake! Then—What did you do before the war, Jerry?" I asked, thinking he might well have been a graduate student in literature—in which case his casual, almost bold manner, his personal sloppiness, even his disturbing and intense eyes would have had quite different meanings for me. If he had been a graduate student in literature, I could somehow feel safer with him.

"I was not a graduate student in literature, if that's what you're thinking," he replied.

"How did you know?" I gasped.

"I can read your mind," he replied, grinning again triumphantly. "Haven't you noticed that yet?"

**"Yes," I said, a little shaken.**

**"I was a claims agent with Continental. I went to college but did not finish. I wanted to major in everything, and they wouldn't let me. I was and am a sensitive young man. Now—shall we stop by my shack and have a cold beer?"**

After that what could I say but **"All right."** But I added, **"Just a quick one, though. The girls will be wondering what happened to me."** I was nervous, really nervous, about going to his "shack," as he insisted on calling it, but I was determined not to show my nervousness.

Jerry's place was indeed a shack—a one room unpainted structure that reeked of kerosene. But he had a boat, and we took out beer and rowed out on the lake and sat in the bright sunshine drinking beer and talking. I began to relax.

**"You know why I like you?"** he asked me at one point. **"I think it's because you're so decent. I never thought I'd like a woman just because she was decent."**

What do you say to a remark like that? I didn't say anything—just smiled. I had to wrench my eyes away from his again.

**"See?"** he said. **"I gave you a beautiful opening and no smart remark. Just a nice smile. That's what I mean."**

**"I'm just not very quick on my feet, that's all."**

He drained his beer, then picked up the oars and began to row toward shore. **"That's enough. I envy you—Roy? Is that his name?"**

I nodded.

**"Don't sell him short."**

But on the way home my left hand was lying on the car seat and he covered it with his. **"Ruthie,"** he said. **"You make me feel good. Can I come and see you some more?"**

**"Why, of course, Jerry. Why don't you come and have dinner with all of us tomorrow night?"** He seemed so lonely it almost broke my heart.

But he said, **"No. I hanks anyhow. What I had in mind was**

a little different. Do you think you could bring yourself to go dancing with me?"

Dancing was a "date," and married women don't date, and I almost said no. Until it occurred to me that it would be no more a date than Jerry himself had been a pickup; it was all a question of semantics. "I would love to. I would just love to go dancing," I said. "Get dressed up! Really go dancing!"

He laughed delightedly. "Good," he said. "It's a date!"

During the next two weeks we went dancing three times; we took Teddy to an amusement park once. We went to Minneapolis for dinner one night. And on both Saturday nights Jerry took Ethelyn and me to Jimmy's. And those two weeks were among the happiest weeks of my life. I enjoyed waking up now, as well as going to sleep, the world everything I saw, ate, smelled, heard seemed as sharp and clear, as enchanting and as heartbreaking as it had when I was fifteen years old. I began to take glorious solitary swims at six in the morning, to sing when I washed the dishes, to paint my toenails red. But I began, also, to let as many as three nights pass without writing to Roy!

Then one night—a Friday—Jerry and I went to Jimmy's without Ethelyn. As it happened, we sat in the same back booth we had sat in on the night we met. For some reason neither of us could think of anything to say. At last Jerry broke the odd silence by saying, "Jealous of your husband any more?" And he smiled fondly at me.

"Why?" I smiled back.

"Your eyes match the rest of your face now. No crying in the beer these days?"

"I was really silly, wasn't I?"

"You were really silly," he repeated, flicking my chin with his finger.

"Jerry, you've helped me so much," I said. "I see things clearly and realistically. I'd pretty much lost my perspective on things when I met you."

### **My perspective**

On the way home that night I responded to Jerry's kisses with such passion that it frightened both of us. At least I think it frightened him too. "Please," I said, pulling away from him finally, "we'd better not see each other any more. This isn't a good direction to be going in."

"What direction is that?" he murmured.

"Please, Jerry Don't tease me "

"My God, Ruthie! *I'm* not teasing you "

"Yes You're mocking me "

He pulled me to him again and kissed me so hard that I began to shiver somewhere in the marrow of my bones "Don't! Don't!" I breathed, and I opened the car door to get out. "Jerry, we must never be alone again

He drew away from me then and lit a cigarette "All right," he said coldly

' You understand'

"Of course "

"You'll come tomorrow night? It's Saturday I mean—it will be all right for us to go to Jimmy's with Ethelyn "

"No Not tomorrow night

"Jerry, does that mean this is goodbye I quavered

And he burst out laughing "What do you think?" Then he kissed me lightly on the forehead "Good night, Ruthie," he said, and he drove away

I was tormented that night afraid he would never come back, afraid of what would happen if he did come back. I tried to summon Roy's image to my mind, I tried to concentrate hard on Roy But his image kept slipping away meekly, like a sentence in a textbook read over and over again. And before that night was over I found myself hoping, almost praying, that he was happy somewhere with Jo I tried castigating myself with words like "lustful" and "infidelity of the spirit," but it did no good When I tried to imagine the suc-

ceeding days without Jerry, they seemed as unbearable as the early days of the war had been without Roy.

I didn't see Jerry for more than a week after that. I felt lethargic and depressed. All the carbonation had left my spirit. The days were just days now—flat and pointless, like the days on Woodrow Avenue. Although I never admitted it to myself, I believe that before the end of that week I was ready to make whatever compromises were necessary to continue my relationship with Jerry. I might even have gone in search of him had it not been for the sudden turn Mary Louise's affairs took that week.

One afternoon the proprietor of the little crossroads store and gas station, whose telephone we used for emergencies, appeared at our back door. "Mrs. Mabry has a long-distance call."

Mary Louise turned white. "What? Where from?" she gasped.

"New York." He handed her a piece of paper. "You're to call—let's see—that's Operator Seventy-six in New York."

"Thank you. I'll be right up."

It was raining, and she threw a raincoat over her shoulders and went out in her bare feet. She said nothing to us—only grimaced.

When she returned she was shaking all over, her teeth chattering, her hair dripping with rain, her feet muddy. "Well, kids," she said in a voice that shook with shivers, "this is it. That was Don. He's in New York. He has a month's leave on his way to the Pacific. He wants me to meet him in New York and bring Susan." Then: "How can I bring Susan?"

"You can't," Ethelyn said. "Leave her here. Go, and transact your business, and come back."

"I can't. He's never seen Susan. Susan is his daughter."

"Let him come here, then. That would make more sense anyhow," I offered.

**"He won't. He hates Minnesota. He wants to spend his leave in New York."**

**"He doesn't know what he's talking about. You can't spend a leave in New York—the kind he's thinking of—with a baby," I said.**

**"Wait a minute," Ethelyn said. "She's not going to spend the leave with him. Remember? Look, Mary Louise. All you have to do is get on the train tomorrow night, go to New York and tell him, and then come back. If you want Susan on the scene—fine. Take her along."**

**Mary Louise started to cry. "Oh, God! I'm scared." She buried her face in her hands and sobbed and sobbed. I helped her off with her wet clothes then, and Ethelyn made her a cup of hot tea. We called Bruce, who came out after dinner that night and lifted her spirits considerably. "This time next week it will all be settled," she said just before we went to bed. "A person can stand any kind of horror for a week, can't they?"**

**So the next day Mary Louise washed her hair, manicured her nails and packed her bags. And in the late afternoon her father came out with his car and drove her to the station in St. Paul. And she left for New York. Taking Susan with her.**

**Bruce came out as usual on Saturday night. His spirits were high, if a little hectic. "She's going to call me tomorrow night. So don't count on me for dinner. I'll take off around three, I guess."**

**"She ought to be back the middle of the week, then," I said. "Like Wednesday."**

**"Maybe before. Poor baby! I wish I could do it for her. It's a damned mess. But I'll make it up to her the rest of her life."**

**I looked up to see Ethelyn's eyes, filled with tears, regarding the coffeepot solemnly.**

**After he had left Ethelyn said, "The trouble is, I think she really loves him. Bruce, I mean. And she'll really try. But she won't be able to do it. And it will kill him, Ruthie. It will kill him."**



**"You underrate the strength that love can give a person—  
can give Mary Louise."**

**"I hope you're right. Oh, God, how I hope you're right!"**

**But I wasn't right. Mary Louise didn't call Bruce on Sunday night. Nor did she call on Monday or Tuesday. On Wednesday he received a long, anguished letter from her in which she told him it was absolutely impossible to tell Don at this time. He was completely exhausted, so nervous, so much counting on her and Susan to give him strength for the next lap (after all, in a month he would be off for the Pacific and more combat!). To tell him now would be like murder. And yet every minute with him was torture, every minute away from Bruce torture. Nevertheless, it would have to wait until the end of the war. She would be back in a month. They could endure anything for a month, couldn't they? And when she returned she would take an apartment away from her parents' home, and she would continue then to live with her real, her true heart's husband—this time forever and ever.**

**Bruce moved the remainder of her belongings, according to her instructions, back to her parents' home in St. Paul. Both Ethelyn and I were pretty depressed as we packed Susan's toys and Mary Louise's jumble of unmatched socks and costume jewelry. It seemed to me that Mary Louise's dilemma was only a more flamboyant, advanced version of my own dilemma, and the parallel not only depressed me, it frightened me badly. I was certainly in no mood, at least that week, to go in search of Jerry Gates.**

**But Bruce, it seemed, was neither frightened nor depressed. The day after the moving operation he returned to tell us of a surprise he had been keeping from us: he had just bought an old house, a little north of Stillwater, on the St. Croix River.**

**"Signed the papers this morning," he said jubilantly. "I didn't want to tell you until it was a sure thing. It needs a lot of painting and fixing, but by the time Mary Louise is ready to move in, it ought to be quite attractive."**

Ethelyn stared at him incredulously. "Bruce! Don't!" she cried. "You can't count on it that way. What if he's wounded in the Pacific? She'll never leave him then. She won't be able to. A million things could happen between now and your dreamy future."

"I know," he replied soberly. "And I've thought of all of them."

"Oh, like hell you have! You're completely corrupted. You're as bad as she is now. Bruce, you can't invest your whole life in Mary Louise. It's like investing in a cone of cotton candy. I know her. You don't." And then she began to rant and rave in exactly the same way she had ranted and raved to me over our hamburger dinner some weeks before.

But he stopped her. Look, he said almost coldly. "If you will recall, a house for Jennifer has been on my agenda for some time now. She can't stay here with you all winter, you know."

But Ethelyn would not listen. Bruce, with his seemingly blithe confidence in the future, terrified her. Ethelyn, for all her intelligence and affected sophistication, was superstitious. I know, for instance, that she believed she could guarantee Phil's return only by confronting in her imagination, at least once a day, the awful final telegram. I know (because she told me once) that her daily confrontation of the most awful eventuality she could imagine comforted and reassured her, the way prayers comfort and reassure other people. She had a conviction that as soon as you turned your back on the risks in life, as soon as you relaxed for a moment and acted as if your position on this earth were secure, fate would come along with an oversized baseball bat and clobber you over the head. Fate, being basically a sneak, attacks only unsuspecting people. Ergo, if fate could never catch one unawares . . . ?

Bruce became very annoyed with her that evening. He called her first "a ridiculous little girl," then "a woman para-

lyzed by fear," and finally "a crazy Cassandra." Ethelyn would not relent.

But when at last Bruce left, after kissing her good night and telling her to buck up, Ethelyn burst into tears.

"Ruthie! Something terrible is going to happen. Something awful. I can feel it."

"Ethelyn, stop it! Bruce is right. You torture yourself with that kind of thinking. No one can foretell the future. You know that."

She looked up and tried to stop her tears. "I know it, Ruthie. I'm crazy. It's the jitters—the heebie-jeebies. Why don't I hear from Phil? It's not that, though. I'll hear from him. I know it's not that." She blew her nose, dried her eyes, got up and went to the kitchen and mixed herself a drink. Then she spoke again, very slowly and seriously, almost as if she were in a trance. "I feel as if we were all on a toboggan, flying down a steep hill, and we'll never make it, we'll never make it through all those trees at the bottom of the hill. Not you either, Ruthie. You watch out for that damned captain!"

"Ethelyn, you're being utterly ridiculous tonight," I said sternly.

She did not reply: she just sat there, sipping her drink and staring into space. It was ten o'clock, and the wind had risen. It would rain before morning. In the silence I could hear the waves slapping the jetty, rushing against the shore. The door of the outhouse banged at irregular intervals. In the cottage the teakettle wheezed on the electric plate, waiting for us to wash the dinner dishes. Then all at once, with no warning footsteps or tire sounds, someone knocked at our back door.

Ethelyn gazed at me in stark terror. "Don't answer it. Ruthie," she whispered. "Don't!"

"Of course I'll answer it. Ethelyn, get hold of yourself." But I confess my knees and elbows were weak and tingling with adrenalin when I stood up. I remember thinking on the way to the kitchen, "They wouldn't deliver a telegram here, be-

cause it's a temporary address; besides, they're not supposed to deliver telegrams so late at night. To deal with any other eventualities, I picked up a heavy wooden clothes hanger that was lying on a chair. Then I called through the closed door, "Who is it?"

A cracked falsetto voice answered me, "It is I, Little Red Riding Hood."

"Jerry!" I cried, and I opened the door wide. "Oh, come in! Come in! You fool! You scared us!" I was shaking all over now, trembling both with relief and with excitement at seeing Jerry. "Where's your car? We didn't hear it."

As Jerry stepped into the kitchen I saw that his eyes were bloodshot, that his smile was a little silly, that he was indeed quite tight, though by no means drunk.

"I am on a pilgrimage," he said. "A walking pilgrimage. I am walking around Lake Minnehaha stopping at all points of interest to pay my respects. I have stopped at Jimmy's and at several other places I don't even care to mention to you. And now I am stopping here. And who knows where I will stop after here?"

He held a package, wrapped in newspaper, under one arm. "I've brought you a present," he said. He put his other arm around my waist and propelled me into the living room. He nodded to Ethelyn, then turned his attention to the package. "Now, you're to share this with your little friends," he said to me, removing the newspaper. Then, "It's a Ouija board," he said triumphantly. "Given to me by the 'Fourteen' girl at a place known as the Black Owl Hamburger, as I recall. And I thought to myself, this is just what my little friends need. A perfect gift for my little Pendelopes on the north shore of Lake Minnehaha."

Ethelyn, whose face was still pale with terror and who had said nothing to him since his entrance, suddenly began to laugh. Her laughter became very shortly a kind of desperate, hiccoughing hysteria.

**"What's so funny?" he asked, bewildered. When neither of us replied he strode over to Ethelyn and slapped her face so hard it left a red mark on her cheek. And Ethelyn stopped laughing.**

**"Now, what's the pitch?" he asked, looking at both of us with puzzled concern. "Where's what's-her-name? Mary Louise?"**

**"She's gone to New York," I said.**

**"What for?"**

**So I told him. I started with the moment before his entrance and worked my way back to Mary Louise's long-distance telephone call. When I had finished he leaned back in his rocking chair and lit a cigarette. He seemed considerably more sober than when he had first made his appearance. But when he spoke, instead of commenting on Mary Louise's plight he turned to Ethelyn.**

**"Evelyn," he began (he always called her Evelyn, and we no longer bothered to correct him), "Evelyn, you should have been a flyer. I see why you were laughing. You don't need a Ouija board any more than I do. You know it all already, don't you? Just how goddamned rottenly everything's going to turn out. It couldn't possibly turn out any other way because you've put your little kiss of death on the whole shebang. You just weren't cut out for happy endings, like Ruthie here." Then he leaned forward earnestly "Look. I'll tell you exactly why you've got the jitters. You've just been having it too good lately, and now you feel your number's coming up. Well, take it from an old pro who's spent too much of his life, so far, living with curses and hoodoos and gremlins and hunches: Cut it out. Even if you are a witch—and maybe you are, maybe you are—it won't do any good to panic. You're scared, Evelyn. And you've got a goddamned good right to be scared—your brother standing out there with his chest bared for the bullets, your husband off in the middle of a shooting war. Well, *be* scared. But don't try to make some kind of system out**

of it. Because you know what happens when you try to make a system out of it? You go flying right out the door on a broomstick and land in the booby hatch."

I was afraid Ethelyn would be furious with him after that; or, worse, would start laughing or crying again. But she did none of these things. Instead she said nothing—only nodded and smiled at him gratefully. And he returned her smile, almost tenderly. "Now go fix us a drink," he said. "After you look the Bogeyman in the face for a while you deserve a drink. Ruthie doesn't deserve a drink, though, because her mother told her there was no such thing as a Bogeyman, and she believed her."

Jerry stayed until long after midnight. We played with the Ouija board, we played records, and when it began to storm, the three of us put on raincoats and went down to the jetty and stood in the driving rain, watching the wild dark lake and singing hymns and laughing. In one way it was a wonderful evening: Jerry had done for Ethelyn what neither Bruce nor I had been able to do—snapped her out of her superstitious hysteria. But as I stood at the back door saying good night to Jerry, I was aware that from my point of view the evening had been most unsatisfactory. Jerry had made no reference to our past, no reference to our future, by word, innuendo or even glance.

And so I had to say to him, whispering, because of Ethelyn's presence in that thin-walled cottage, "I'm sorry about the other night. I was being silly again, wasn't I? And melodramatic."

"Were you?"

"I think I was. Don't you?"

"I don't know."

"I've missed you. We can't seem to get along without you around here. You were wonderful with Ethelyn tonight."

"I've missed you too."

"Jerry, stop by any time you want to. Forget all that silliness I said the other night."

He looked at me hard, smiled a little. "Do you really mean that?"

I nodded. "When do you leave? I mean, when is your leave over?"

"Before long now."

"But when?"

He leaned over and kissed me lightly on the lips. "I'll come by before it's over. Maybe sooner." Then he opened the door and went out into the quiet, dripping night.

I think the thing that frightens me most about life is that one cannot know, even one second in advance, what lies in store for one. For me, the pure terror of life lies in those stories one reads so often in the newspapers: family of five on way home from summer outing killed instantly in highway crash. Or those holocausts that consume a house, furniture, sleeping babies in the space of the few minutes it takes a mother to run down to the corner grocery. Always I can see the family cut off at the moment when the youngest child has just spotted a Q in the game of Highway Alphabet; and the vision of the mother adding "graham crackers" to her list as her babies burn strikes real terror into my heart.

That's what life did to Ethelyn, after all.

Two days after our evening with Jerry (two golden serene days for both Ethelyn and me) Bruce appeared—at noon. Ethelyn was hanging diapers in the yard. I was preparing lunch in the kitchen. "For God's sake, here comes Bruce!" Ethelyn called to me. "Do you suppose Mary Louise got a sudden attack of guts?" Then to Bruce: "Hi, sweetie! I'm not mad at you any more. You're just in time for lunch."

But Bruce didn't smile. He turned off his ignition, got out of the car, walked determinedly to the clothesline and handed her the War Department telegram informing her of Phil's death. Then he took her in his arms. His shoulders heaved with sobs and the tears ran down his cheeks. But Ethelyn remained dry-eyed. Her face, her arms, her whole body went

slack, like an old doll or a scarecrow. She remained in his arms for a full minute, completely immobile. Then she came into the house. "I knew it already. I knew it a couple of days ago, didn't I?" she said. She walked straight through the living room, out the front door and down to the jetty.

Ethelyn remained at the lake with me for over a week, and not once during that time did I see her cry. It was eerie. She was almost matter-of-fact. She spoke more slowly, and her voice was pitched lower than usual, and always, from noon until bedtime, she had a highball in her hand. But never did she cry, never did she seem even agitated. It was as if she had adjusted to this blow some time ago, as if it were an old scar instead of a bleeding, hideous fresh wound. I thought once perhaps her shock was so deep that she did not realize as yet, would not admit, that Phil was dead. I probed a little, with this hypothesis in mind, thinking that the longer the truth was kept from her heart, the greater the harm would eventually be. But Ethelyn replied to my gentle probes, "You think I'm in shock. I'm not. I wish I were. I know he's dead; and what's more, I've known all along he was going to die, and I'm used to the idea. Ruthie, Phil and I were too good to be true."

To her mother and father, who came out and urged her to return to Stillwater with them, she gave a flat "no." "Why should I go back to Stillwater? I'm all through waiting." The sensible thing for her to do, of course, would have been to stay at the cottage with me for the duration of the summer and then to move into Bruce's new house with Bruce and Jennifer in the fall. But to all such suggestions she replied, "Why in the world should I do that?" As if it were some completely outlandish idea.

In the end she announced, quite abruptly, that she was going to Chicago the following Tuesday. "The war's over," she said. "I've got to start living. I'll find a job and an apartment and start living." All of us cautioned her against acting hastily during this trying time, but she would not listen. The



only thing that made any sense to her, apparently, was her notion that the war was over now, and it was time she pulled herself together and started to live again.

The war was not over, of course. In fact, during that week the most earth-shaking event of the entire war occurred: the Bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. Newspapers, radios, the Elwoods, my parents, Bruce, the man at the crossroads store, everyone, it seemed, was awe struck by the sickening and terrifying implications of this event. Everyone, that is, except Ethelyn and me. The war was over for Ethelyn, and she simply refused to recognize the Bomb's existence, even though her husband's death was, in all probability, linked closely to that bomb. (Phil had been a B 29 navigator.) She simply shrugged; what did it matter now?

My reaction was similar to hers. Not *What did it matter now?* but simply *What did it matter?* A bomb was a bomb, and the fact that this bomb was able to blast a whole city off the face of the earth seemed no more sickening and terrifying to me than the fact that smaller (and friendlier) bombs had blasted only parts of cities off the face of the earth. I remember reading somewhere that the suffering in this world can be no greater than that which is borne by one single person. One bomb, multiplied by one person, equals the same horror as one bomb multiplied by a hundred thousand persons. In any absolute terms, that is. And it was absolute terms, mostly, in which the Bomb was being discussed. I was glad when Teddy, fiddling as usual with the knobs on the radio, turned the tuning knob too far, broke the cable and silenced all the awe-struck, Doomsday radio commentators.

The day Bruce brought Jennifer home to Stillwater to his mother's house, Ethelyn went with him. She packed up all her belongings in the Stillwater house, so that they could be shipped to her easily once she had found a permanent place in Chicago. Then she returned to the lake. The cottage seemed strange. I was reminded of that nursery rhyme, "Four little

dickie birds sitting in a tree. One flew away and then there were three." There were three of us now, and soon—the next day, in fact—another would fly away. Then there'd be two: Teddy and I.

Mother, of course, expected that Teddy and I would return to St. Paul as soon as Ethelyn left, but I was reluctant to commit myself. Why? I'll tell you why: I was waiting for Jerry Gates. Jerry had said he would return before his leave was over; he had not returned as yet—and I would wait. I gave Mother a hundred reasons why I must remain at the lake. And I believed every one of them, I had not, as yet—admitted even to myself the simple, obvious—and single—reason for my decision.

Ethelyn left for Chicago on schedule. As I waved goodbye to her and Bruce, the bright morning sunshine—the oak tree, the pump, the twisted apple tree—the gravel drive and the hollyhocks, all the familiar landscape we had shared all summer, seemed unbearably poignant. A lump came into my throat that stayed with me all day.

I went back into the cottage and brewed myself a pot of coffee. There were all kinds of things I could do, nothing I had to do. I sat at the sawbuck table, drinking my coffee, listening to the overwhelming silence—squirrels leaping about in the oak tree, a monotonous mourning dove, cats shifting into second as they left the stop sign at the crossroads, Teddy's soft jabbering to himself as he dropped stones into a coffee can outside the window. The silence made my bowels constrict with nervous excitement. I decided to heat some water, take advantage of the bright sunshine and catch up on my laundry.

The day passed slowly. Teddy and I went swimming, walked to the village. The August afternoon was still full of the kind of silence made more absolute by the slow metallic rhythms of cicadas, a buzzing fly. I glanced through several magazines I had bought in the village, washed my hair, took Teddy for a ride in the rowboat. And at last it was evening.

I put Teddy to bed, as usual, at six-thirty, fixed myself some tomato soup and a cheese sandwich for supper. Then I sat down in one of the rockers and tried to read a book. But I couldn't read: I would read five pages, then realize I had absolutely no notion of what I had just read. I was consumed with restlessness. I put aside the book and decided to knit and listen to the radio—until I remembered that the radio was broken. I then wrote a short letter to Roy. The wind was rising and the air smelled like rain. After I had finished my letter, I went outdoors. There was a moon, and there were stars, but the sky was mackerelled and the moon went racing over its curdled surface, blown by a damp, exciting wind that seemed to be coming from outer space. I shivered and returned to the cottage. I made myself a cup of tea. Then, since it was nine o'clock, I went to bed.

But I didn't go to sleep. I lay there listening to the waves slapping the dock, to the wind in the trees, to the cars going by on the road behind the cottage, to Teddy's soft breathing. I would realize suddenly that my fists were clenched, my toes curled, my teeth clamped tight together, and I would consciously relax, shift my position, and begin again my attempt to sleep. Once I was almost asleep when I heard a siren, and I started into alert wakefulness at once. It was the village fire alarm, its sound blown to my ears by a favourable wind.

After that I began to hear many things—men's voices, far in the distance, shouting. Then two shots. I froze into an uncomfortable posture of waiting and listening, but there was only silence now. I recalled someone talking about mysterious shots in the night. "Does anyone ever discover their origin? No. Because they do not exist. They are figments of that monstrosity, the human imagination." Had I read that? Or had someone said it? It seemed unlikely that anyone I knew would have said such a thing . . . except possibly Jerry . . .

But now there was a rustling in the bushes outside my window. The adrenaline went streaking through my body. I lay

motionless, thinking only of the inaccessibility of the butcher knife in the kitchen. I must have lain in the same position for a good fifteen minutes, during which time I heard no more rustling and the adrenaline in my body gradually subsided. At last I said to myself, This is nonsense. I bravely switched on the light, pulled on my robe and, armed with a flashlight and the butcher knife from the kitchen, went outdoors and made a thorough inspection of the premises. Then, reassured, I returned, left the flashlight and the butcher knife on the floor near my bed, and once more tried to go to sleep. It was a little after midnight.

I was in that crucial area of consciousness where the world is just beginning to blur and fade when I heard the sound of tires on gravel in the driveway. I sat bolt upright in bed, my heart hammering so violently that it was hard for me to swallow. Why was he coming now, so late? I realized for the first time, at that moment, that I had been waiting for him all day. I was trembling with excitement and nervousness—nervousness because the implications of an after midnight call from Jerry were very disturbing to me. Dear God, what was I to do now? I needed time, more time to think it all through! But even as I put on my robe (this time in the dark) I realized that Jerry had no way of knowing I was alone in the cottage. He did not know of Phil's death or Ethel's departure; there were, after all, no implications to the lateness of his call, beyond the possibility that he was tight. This realization reassured me considerably, and my trembling eased a little. I tiptoed into the living room to await his knock. To turn on a light, to go to the door before he knocked, would have indicated an eagerness I did not wish him to see.

But his knock did not come. I tiptoed into the kitchen and peeked out the window.

And there, by the light of the car's headlights, I saw, not the tall, gangling figure of Jerry, but a short, stocky man, urinating against our oak tree! And even as I watched in horror, another

man in the car called to him thickly, "For crissake, Emil, catch your back teeth when they float out!"

Both men laughed. The short stocky man zipped up his fly, then walked over to the cottage and rapped on the wall of what had been Mary Louise's bedroom. "Well, what do you know?" he called to his companion. "They got this thing made out of streetcars!"

"No kidding."

The other man got out of the car, and in numb terror I stole back to my bedroom and found the flashlight and the butcher knife. Then I stood and waited, frozen in the middle of the living room, while the two men walked all around the cottage, tapping on each streetcar wall.

"Quite an idea," the first man said. "By God if it isn't."

But his companion was not so fascinated. "Come on. Come on, for crissake. We ain't got all night."

And so they returned to their car and roared off up the driveway, spraying gravel behind them. When I was sure that they had gone for good I went out to the kitchen, poured myself a glass of whisky in the dark and sat down at the sawbuck table, shaking all over. It was only when I decided to light a cigarette that I realized one hand still had a tight grip on the butcher knife. And so I began to sob - not cry, sob—wildly, hysterically, with gasps and spasms that wrenched my stomach muscles as violently as exercise. For what is more terrifying than a butcher knife held against phantoms?

Unless it is the realization that one is adrift, all alone, in the middle of an ocean, out of sight of all familiar landmarks. I realized, at last, the full implications of my remaining, alone, at Lake Minnehaha. I had been waiting for Jerry Gates, and Jerry Gates had not come; but I could not tell whether the anguish I felt was inspired by self loathing or by disappointment because he had not come.

At three-thirty I went to bed and fell into a kind of tortured doze, only to be awakened again a little before five by Teddy.

A few birds were beginning to stir in the trees; the blackness of the night was already beginning to fade. I went to the kitchen in my bare feet to get Teddy a cup of milk and a cracker. It was chilly and damp in the predawn gloom, and the cottage smelled musty and sour. I turned on the light, and a small grey mouse ran out of the cupboard and across the floor in front of me. I gasped. But when I turned around and saw, peeking over the back of the hot plate, another mouse—its glittering black eyes transfixed by my presence, I screamed.

The sound of one's own scream in an empty house in the silence before dawn is an unforgettable sound. Where in the world is anyone—*where where where*—to make one stop screaming, to return one to one's sanity? Quickly, quickly, lest Jerry Gates appear at any minute—quickly, quickly, before I lost myself entirely, I fed Teddy his breakfast, gulped a glass of milk myself, dressed us both, stuffed Teddy's diaper bag with some diapers and—unexplicably, his bathing trunks and an economy size tube of zinc oxide ointment. Then, carrying Teddy, and Teddy's purple kangaroo, and the diaper bag, I fled.

I walked through the wet dawn, heard the birds come to life, saw the sun come up in a golden haze so blinding and unfamiliar that it seemed as if I might be on another planet. I walked the mile to the village and caught the six thirty bus for St. Paul. I sat down next to an old woman with no teeth and with a wrinkled slit for a mouth.

"Eh, sonny, going to see your daddy now," she said, poking at Teddy.

"See my kangaroo?" Teddy replied.

"Oh, my, what a nice horse. What a nice boy. Daddy going to bring you some chewing gum? Lots of nice chewing gum?"

"Gum," Teddy said, holding out his hand. And she put a gumdrop in it and began to rummage around in her large dirty bag for more gumdrops. "The bad old Japs are all gone," she murmured.

I looked at her askance, under the impression that one of us was mad; and I could very well have believed that it was I. But as it turned out, neither the old woman nor I was mad. The bus had been under way only five minutes before it became clear to me that the Japs had surrendered the night before. It was V-J Day.

Mother, of course, was both surprised and delighted to see us that morning. She insisted on cooking waffles and pork sausages for us at ten o'clock in the morning and when I was unable to eat mine she told me that I looked as if I were coming down with something and had better take some aspirin and go to bed. I protested that I was merely tired. I told her about the night's intruders and she was appalled. She confessed that she had known something like that would happen, that, in fact, she had been expecting worse than that all summer, that only last night she had said to Dad—Sam, I'm worried about Ruthie. Something is happening to Ruthie.

I felt weak, drained of all feeling and I let her talk. Right after lunch I went to bed for a nap, and I awakened about six o'clock in the evening with a fever. Mother, of course, called the doctor at once, over my protests.

"You don't ignore a fever," she said. "Ruthie, the way you've been living all summer it could be almost anything. Typhoid, dysentery."

But it was neither typhoid nor dysentery. Nor even flu. The doctor left codeine for my aching bones, and a sedative. "The throat's perfectly clear. Then to me. What's the matter, Ruthie? V-J Day too much for you?"

I shrugged.

"Well, I expect I'll see a lot of 'flu' among you gals during the next few weeks. You've been pretty brave, all of you. But now you can let go. Just let go. Let Mama take care of you for a few days. You'll be all right."

"Well, if there's nothing wrong with me I'm certainly not going to lie here in bed," I replied.

**"Wait a minute. I didn't say there was nothing wrong with you. What I said is that I don't think you have the flu. I think you're exhausted. And you *will* get the flu, or something worse, if you don't take it easy."**

**"And I," Mother added with fond sternness from her post near the door, "have had just about enough of you, my pet. You're going to do what you're told for a change."**

And because there was fever in my bones and I was so terribly tired I did do what I was told. I stayed in bed for nearly a week. Mother kept Taddy out of my room, because in spite of the doctor's diagnosis she still believed I had some kind of "bug." Every night Mother and Taddy would appear together at the threshold of my room. "Say good night to Mommy, dear. Poor Mommy sick in bed." Taddy, all scrubbed and pink and moist from his evening bath, would stand in the doorway, clutching his kangaroo and we would blow each other good-night kisses. The rest of the time I dozed, listened halfheartedly to my bedside radio, drank the egg-nogs and the iced grape juice and ginger ale that Mother brought me, and glanced unseeingly through the stacks of women's magazines and rental-library books she provided for me. I neither wrote nor received any letters.

Dad came up in the evenings, and we listened to several news analysts together. "Well, Ruthie, it's all over at last, and it won't be long now." He took out his little notebook and pen one night and figured Roy's discharge points for me. I had already figured them at least two hundred times. "Of course it doesn't mean anything. I expect they'll send them home when they're good and ready and not before."

I agreed. During those days I spent in bed, nothing excited me, troubled me or even interested me. I knew the war was over, but the fact had not reached my heart yet. I knew Roy would be home before many months, but I had lost all desire to see him. By this I do not mean that I was averse to seeing him; it simply no longer mattered to me one way or the other.



But one day toward the end of the week I awoke at 5 A.M., feeling refreshed. I was ravenous. My illness was gone. And I realized finally that the war was over—yes, the war was really over at last and we could begin, now, to live. That evening Dad drove me out to the lake, where I packed the remainder of my belongings and put the cottage in order. Dad sat on the jetty, smoking his pipe in the twilight, while I worked. By the time I was ready to leave, it was dark.

"This is a pretty nice spot you had here, you know?" Dad remarked as he loaded my bags into the trunk. "I'll bet you had a pretty good summer, at that. Nice you were able to do it."

"Yes," I said. But at that point I had no idea what kind of spot it was or, indeed, what kind of summer I had had. Have you ever had a series of dreams in which the same unidentified landscape appears again and again? A house, perhaps, that does not exist but is nevertheless completely familiar to you? That night, the cottage at Lake Minnehaha seemed to be such a house—such a house and nothing more. There were mice in that house, and butcher knives, and yellow curtains, and a phonograph that played "The Stars and Stripes Forever," and a hundred disembodied faces, brooding, laughing, talking earnestly, saying the kinds of things that sound so wise and original in a dream, so flat, banal and even meaningless in the morning light.

The weeks that followed, before Roy's return, were in many ways some of the most pleasant weeks of my life. With the end in sight, with the certainty that I could plan now for a foreseeable future, the conflicts between Mother and me seemed to disappear. She seemed to grow younger, I older, as we shopped for my second trousseau, as we discussed bathroom colour schemes, as I hurriedly copied recipes I had always meant to copy from her large recipe file. We chatted naturally all day now: "You know, dear. In that apple butter, I always cut down on the vinegar. I think there's too much vinegar in it. You

might just put a question mark after the vinegar and then taste it."

I substituted at her bridge club on two occasions during those weeks, and I really enjoyed those afternoons. Mother's friends seemed to admit me now into that Secret Society of Wives. They included me in discussions of their husbands' shortcomings, slipcover fabrics, the menopause, mothproofing methods, dry-skin difficulties and weight control. I had never been particularly interested in such discussions before, and I suppose even then my interest was not real. My enjoyment of the discussions was derived more from a sense of anticipation: in just a few more months I would be a genuine wife, a genuine young matron with a home and a husband to indulge, humour, manage, a young matron with normal, everyday problems that could be discussed over a bridge table.

"Are you planning to stay in St. Paul, Ruthie?" one of the women asked me once.

"I have no idea what Roy's plans are at this point. He's mentioned a few things, but they sound pretty wild to me."

"Would you like to leave? Would you like to set out on a new pioneering adventure?" the woman continued eagerly.

And I replied, "Frankly at this point, no. Just a decent home and a husband to come to it every night will be adventure enough for me."

"Well, of course it will!" another woman put in, in a voice full of warm and understanding sympathy. "It will be enough for all you girls, I imagine, for a long long time to come. You forget, Hester," the woman continued, "that these girls have never known what we've always taken for granted: a lovely little home and family. Why, the very thought of any more makeshift existence must frighten you to death, dear. I know it would frighten me to death."

"Not frighten me," I replied. "It just leaves me very, very cold."

And they all laughed.

But even as I was enjoying those easy, trouble-free weeks, I was aware of a vague sense of apprehension beneath the surface. What would Roy be like after nearly two years? What would he look like, what would he think, what would he believe? Perhaps his wild ideas sounded perfectly sensible to him. Suppose he really meant to buy a resort in the north woods and finish his novel? Or go to Washington? He had no job to come home to. His future was a perfectly clean piece of paper on which he could write anything. Suppose, as so many magazine articles suggested, Roy, as a returning veteran, should spend several years in moody silence, trying to find himself, trying to decide what to write on that blank piece of paper? Well, I would have to be understanding. And patient. But I would certainly not stand by and allow him, in his confusion, to write something outlandish on that paper.

Then one afternoon, in the middle of October, Roy called me from San Francisco and after we had shouted at each other at least ten times, "You sound exactly the same," and "I love you too," we arranged to meet in Chicago toward the end of the week.

"Your mother can keep the baby," he asked.

It sounded strange to hear him refer to Teddy as "the baby"; but Roy after all had never seen Teddy. He was only "the baby," an idea to Roy.

The first four days of our second honeymoon were exactly the way a honeymoon should be—and too often, is not. We ate steak or lobster every night, drank champagne, had breakfast in bed, made love in the morning, walked the streets holding hands and smiling. And we talked—and we talked, and we talked: moods, ideas, beliefs, plans, values, hopes, fears, the recounting of incidents, the descriptions of landscapes, characters, atmospheres. It seemed as if the significant incidents, the important details, would never stop occurring to one or the other of us.

But on the fifth day the tenor of our conversation changed

—became focused, you might say. We were dressing to go out for dinner. Roy called to me from the shower. "Ruthie, there's some clean underwear in one of the pockets of my flight bag. Will you hand it to me, please?"

Everything was crammed into that flight bag—old flashlight batteries, half-empty packages of cigarettes, shoe polish, rags for polishing brass, a mashed chocolate bar, old letters—all helter-skelter among the clean underwear. I found Roy's underwear, brought it to him, then returned to the flight bag—to put it in some kind of order, I told myself. But as I rummaged through Roy's possessions—unfamiliar personal things he had acquired in his life apart from me—I began to feel a little strange. For instance, to see, lying there in a flight bag in a hotel room in Chicago, my own handwriting on letters I had written to Roy from Lake Minnehaha made me feel a little as if I were spying on him. Does this make sense? Or was I really looking for what I found?

At any rate, what I found was this: a letter addressed to Lieutenant Roy Harkness in an unfamiliar handwriting and bearing a foreign postage stamp. The shower was still running. My heart began to beat very fast. I took the letter out of the envelope. "Bombay, July 29," it said. And it began: "My dearest one—Try not to pay attention to anything I say. I'm a poor sport and always have been . . ." The shower stopped running, and in a panic I returned the letter to its envelope and the envelope to the flight bag.

It took me two hours to summon sufficient courage to say anything to Roy. And then I didn't mention the letter; I couldn't. Instead I said to him as we sat in the restaurant finishing our coffee, "Roy, tell me about Jo Browning."

Roy looked puzzled. "I have told you about her, darling. She kept me from going off my rocket in India. There's nothing more to tell."

"There must be. She keeps turning up in your stories about other things. I keep getting this sketchy but very vivid im-

pression. What I mean is, tell me about her in chronological order. You know . . ."

"No, I don't. I've told you all I can think of to tell."

"No, you haven't. I just feel you haven't. Roy, we've always stressed honesty in our marriage, haven't we? I mean, we've always agreed you can't build anything solid on a lie. No matter how much the truth hurts. I just want to know all there is to know about Jo. I want to know . . . if you slept with her, I guess. Then I won't say any more. It will all be in the past. But it's important for me to know. I can't explain why. It's just terribly important to me to start out with everything . . . well, out in the open."

Roy looked at me for a long time. Then he said, "Yes, I slept with her."

"How many times?"

"Oh, hell, Ruthie! What a question!"

"I mean, more than once—or two or three times?"

"Yes. But that's not the point." He leaned forward earnestly. "Ruthie, I wish I could make you feel how it was in India. Imagine sitting around a fantastic place like India for damn near two years, playing poker and writing letters. Ruthie, nothing ever sleeps in India. You have this sense of life going on all night too: the crazy night sounds, the birds, the insects, and people, people, everywhere, all the time, walking up and down the roads in the middle of the night. I got to feeling I was in some crazy damned dream. Really. As if I might crack up any day. Jo—the whole Browning family, for that matter—snapped me out of it. It's bad when your life keeps seeming like a dream."

"I know."

"Sure you know, honey." He reached for my hand. "Jo has no more to do with you than you have to do with India. Now just forget it all. Now you know, and we'll just forget it."

"All right, Roy." I really meant to forget it, too.

But several hours later, before we went to sleep, I had to

ask him: "Roy, was she the only other woman you slept with while you were overseas?"

"No. There was a nurse one time in Calcutta. And a WAC corporal in Algiers—on our way over."

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

"What were their names?"

"Hell, I don't remember "

"Yes you do. You remember people's names "

"The nurse was Margie something or other."

"And the WAC?"

"Corporal Eunice Maguire "

I really meant to forget it all, and I tried. But I couldn't. Those three women, the nurse, the corporal and Jo Browning, had shown me that Roy was not mine, had never been mine and would never be mine. I don't know which image frightened me more—the image of Roy sleeping with someone whose last name he could not remember, or the image of Roy becoming so close to another woman that by his own admission she had "kept him from going off his rocker." Either way I lost.

Is it so inexplicable, then, that I should have been somewhat reluctant to start out in search of brave new worlds with a person whose love I could not be sure of? No, Roy's Washington plans did not appeal to me. It seemed to me that what we needed at that point in our lives was a great big portion of normal living. The war had rotted the foundations of our life together. There was no time now for brave new worlds; our time must be spent repairing those rotted foundations.

And I'm not speaking merely of my shaken trust in Roy's love. There was Teddy, too—the baby,' as Roy had called him and continued to call him for a good month after his return. Oh, he was pleased as anything, of course, that he had such a fine healthy son. And he told me over and over again what a good job I'd done. But he seemed to be embarrassed about

Teddy, didn't quite know what to say to him or how to handle him.

"Roy's just a man, that's all," Mother said. "Wait until Teddy's ready to throw a football around."

But she wasn't so philosophical when Roy would decide just before bedtime, to roughhouse with Teddy. "Roy, stop it!" she'd say a little sharply. "We'll put him to bed, and he won't want to go to sleep. He'll lie up there yelling and shaking his crib, and you'll wonder why. Use your head, boy."

She was irritated, also, when Roy would give Teddy sips of his beer. "Roy! He's a baby. There's alcohol in that."

Roy would grin at her, a little defiantly. "Now, Harriet, look at what good healthy soldiers all the little German boys grew up to be."

Finally, Roy and Mother had one bad scene over (of all things) Teddy's inability to urinate standing up. After that scene they no longer sparred over Teddy in a friendly way. Mother assumed a tight-lipped, well-he's-your-son-I-suppose attitude, and Roy stopped roughhousing with Teddy and giving him sips of beer.

But now, since Mother had declared Teddy "our son," we could no longer expect her to put him to bed (so we could go out for dinner) or get him up from his nap (so we could visit old haunts on the campus). And of course it was impossible to hire a baby-sitter with Mother right there in the house. I was pretty annoyed with Roy, therefore, when he said to me one day, "How in the hell one small baby can take up so much of one woman's time is more than I can understand!"

I told him it was *not* more than I could understand, that he couldn't have his cake and eat it too, that if he hadn't been so touchy about Mother and Teddy I might have more time for my role as playgirl, etc., etc., etc. We were lying on the beds in my room, having another of our whispered arguments. It's terrible to have to make love quietly, to have to argue in

whispers, but what else can you do when you are living in someone else's home?

At one point in the argument Roy stopped whispering and said in a normal tone of voice, "Ruthie, this is nuts. We've got to get out of here fast. This is no good for any of us. Your mother and father included." Then, turning on his elbow, all eagerness, all good humour: "What do you say we hop a train, the three of us, the day after Thanksgiving? I know it's much too soon to have heard from Benson on that deal, but there are other jobs, other things I could do while I was waiting. Or maybe just do nothing. Just enjoy ourselves. Visit the White House. Visit the Senate. Visit the National Gallery." He grinned. "God knows we're filthy rich right now."

"We're not filthy rich." I knew Roy was kidding, really, but I also knew that in some funny way he was serious too. He kept acting as if we were rich, because of the terminal-leave pay and because we had \$3,500 in the bank.

"Well, so we're not rich. I'll write my memoirs while we're waiting, and then we'll be rich."

"Darling, have you ever heard of the housing shortage?"

"Darling, I might have asked you the same question when you first came barrelling down South."

"But we didn't have Teddy then. I'd go in a minute if we didn't have Teddy."

"Would you?"

"You know I would."

"No I don't, Ruthie. Not any more. I think you'd much prefer to stay right here. Not in this room, maybe, but not very far from it either."

"I'll go anywhere you want to go, do anything you want to do. But just in passing: What's so awful about the Twin Cities?"

He made a face indicating distaste.

"No, really, Roy. What's so awful about settling down in the Twin Cities just temporarily? I agree with you that we



do have to get out of *here*. And fast. It's awful. But why couldn't we do our waiting on the Benson deal in a little place of our own? You get some kind of job and we'll find a little apartment. Then when the Washington thing is ripe—off we go. And in the meantime we won't just have been waiting some more. Waiting and waiting and waiting. Sometimes it seems as if that's what we've been doing ever since we got married. Waiting to get started. Waiting for life to begin."

"No," Roy said, after a thoughtful pause. "I don't like the idea of getting all established here in the Twin Cities. Just for a couple of months. It doesn't make sense. It makes more sense to take off and have ourselves a little fling while we're waiting."

"But it wouldn't be getting 'all established.' We'd just find a little apartment and you'd take some job, just for the money, nothing that it would be hard to quit or anything—"

"Till the first of the year? No. It's almost the end of November already. I should hear before Christmas. We should be able to get under way by the first of the year."

"Roy, you won't hear by Christmas. You ought to know enough about dealing with the government by this time to know that you won't hear by Christmas."

So we stayed on with Mother and Dad through Thanksgiving, and then through the pre-Christmas weeks, busy, festive weeks, getting ready for "the most joyous Christmas we've ever known" (Mother's phrase). The atmosphere in the household improved during those pre-Christmas weeks. Mother, the Christmas spirit upon her, began to treat Roy with indulgence, as if he were a college kid home for the holidays; and she forgot to ignore Teddy Roy, for some reason, responded perfectly (his tongue in his cheek, of course), and we were able, therefore, to have a great deal more freedom of movement than in the weeks when he and Mother had been dealing with their respective prides. Many of our old college friends were "home from the wars" for the holidays too, and we went

to parties, met friends downtown for cocktails and dinner, even went dancing on our fourth wedding anniversary.

It was during those pre-Christmas weeks, also, that Dad first mentioned the job at Chandler's to Roy. Chandler's is St. Paul's largest department store. L. T. Chandler, Jr., had long been a friend of Dad's, and it was through L. T. that Dad learned of the opening in the advertising department—the kind of opening that leads (if you have Roy's capabilities) straight to the position of advertising manager. Dad mentioned the opening as a possibility in case the Washington deal fell through, and Roy was sufficiently interested to spend a whole morning with L. T. Chandler. But when he came home he said, "It's not what I want, Ruthie. And it's not the sort of job you could start, then quit. They're looking for executive material. I'd have to commit myself - not on paper, of course, but to myself - for at least five years."

Christmas was almost upon us and still no definite word from Washington. During the week before Christmas I received cards from both Ethelyn and Mary Louise. I had meant to call Stillwater to get Ethelyn's address from the Elwoods before I left for Chicago to meet Roy. But in the excitement I had forgotten to do so, and I had been unable to find her name in the telephone directory, of course. The Christmas cards were the first words I had received from either Ethelyn or Mary Louise.

Ethelyn's card was a very expensive looking, large silver stylized star on rough black paper. The word "Peace" was engraved beneath the star. And inside the folder, also engraved: "Ethelyn Elwood Nash." That was all. The card was post-marked Chicago, but it had no return address.

Mary Louise's card was a fat, jolly Santa Claus. She had begun a message in green ink (Mary Louise still wrote back-hand and dotted her *i*'s with little circles) on the inside left cover of the card, had gone on with it all over the Merry Christmas and Happy New Year part, had continued it on the

back and had concluded it on a half sheet of yellow typing paper. She told me that Don, of course, had not had to go on to the Pacific, that she and Don and Susan were living in an apartment in Boston. Don was going to work for a Ford agency after the first of the year. Everything was simply beautiful. Including the apartment, which had "a lovely Old World feeling to it—a courtyard with a slender tree that breaks its heart every day against a grey and crumbling wall over which rich and decadent vines sort of tumble and hang." She told me also that Bruce had sold his house, making quite a nice profit on it, "so it didn't turn out to be such a bad investment after all"; and that Mrs. Elwood still refused to take Jennifer permanently, but that Bruce had found a woman to look after her and they were all living at the Elwoods' temporarily, in a state of truce. She hadn't heard from Ethelyn; she wondered if I had; Bruce wrote that Ethelyn had a very glamorous job as an editor of something or other and a beautiful apartment full of thick carpets and modern art. She gave me her new address three times and concluded: "WRITE!!!"

Well, Christmas came at last, and the only things I can remember clearly about what was to be "the most joyous Christmas we've ever known" were that Dad's present to us was a 1946 Chevrolet, and the smell of roasting turkey kept me retching and vomiting all day long.

Mother said I was pregnant, and I agreed with her that I might very well be. But I added that the nausea had nothing whatever to do with it—I had not lost a single meal with Teddy. But later in the week, when the nausea continued, I went to the doctor. He confirmed our diagnosis and added, "No two pregnancies are ever alike." And he was right. For the next three weeks, nausea enveloped me like a large, soft comforter. I spent my days retching into the toilet and lying on my bed, cold and perspiring and entirely sick of life.

It was during this time that Roy called Benson (for the third time) in Washington and discovered that "the deal is yours if

you can wait until June." But how could we wait until June?

So on January 15 Roy went to work for L. T. Chandler & Co. By the first of February the nausea had left me, except for brief periods in the late afternoon (the smell of dinner seemed to bring it on). I began to spend my days apartment hunting, and toward the end of February I found one: four rooms on the second floor of a remodelled old house. But Dad and Mother thought it seemed rather depressing. And one night we all drove out to a new subdivision and went through a model home which was on display.

"I think this makes more sense for you kids," Dad said. "Why pay rent all your lives and have nothing to show for it?"

"Because we can't afford to own a house yet," Roy replied.

In the end Dad gave us the money for the down payment. When Roy protested Dad said, "When I'm very old and need it, and you're very rich and don't need it, you can pay me back if you insist."

It was the first of May before our house was ready. I spent the summer furnishing it, getting settled, keeping Teddy out of the mud in the back yard, assembling a layette, making arrangements for the new baby. I scarcely had time to catch my breath before Linda was born, at the end of August.

In fact, when it comes right down to it, the moments I've been able to catch my breath since that time have been very few and far between. Always, always, it seems, there are curtains to make or shelves to paint. And then it's time for Christmas. Or someone gets the measles or breaks a collarbone. And if it isn't sickness it's the Cub Scouts or the Library Association or eternal trips to the dentist. If this is what Ethelyn means, I thought, by my being a *Ladies' Home Journal* character, then she's perfectly right: I am indeed such a character.

But how, I ask you, could I possibly be anything else—with a husband, three children and a four bedroom house to care for? And you can bet your life that same husband would be the first to cry out should he be served canned spaghetti for

dinner, or should he find his wardrobe, even once, in something less than perfect condition! It's all very well to let the dandelions grow and spend one's time discussing the Far East until 4 A.M., I thought, but the fact remains that eventually the dandelions must be tended to, and, in any case, there are always the children at 7 A.M., with bright faces and empty stomachs. It's all very well for childless apartment dwellers to ignore the dandelions and the children, to continue to live, as they approach forty, the dashing life of young bohemians. Who, I asked myself then, should call whom a little girl?

Did Ethelyn or Roy imagine for one minute that I *preferred* digging dandelions to walking through a gentle spring rain or sitting up all night talking? Neither one of them seemed to realize that the true sign of maturity is selflessness, the sacrifice of one's immediate desires to something larger and more important than one's senses or whims. Mature people believe in the future, give thought to the consequences of their behavior. I smiled bitterly. And it was *I* who was being called immature!

No, the little girl Roy mourned—the gay and gallant Girl He Left Behind Him—had died on V J night, had been killed (and mercifully so!) by a man named Jerry Gates. And if ever a human being had cause to thank a murderer, Roy had cause to thank Jerry Gates!

Perhaps I would tell him that in the morning. Perhaps I would tell him all about Jerry Gates. He might then realize that I knew a little something myself about the devastating power of extramarital relationships, that I was not simply a jealous and obtuse wife but a woman who had fought and won a battle with her own hedonism. In fact, I decided, the story of my relationship with Jerry Gates might prove both interesting and instructive for Roy. And I began to plan *exactly* how I would tell it to him in the morning.

# *Part Four*



**W**ELL, IT WAS SEVEN-THIRTY when I woke up. I had slept only three hours, yet I felt refreshed, calm almost normal. Roy was in the shower. The familiar sound of a running shower, the familiar odour of his shaving lotion, somehow reassured me. The panic, even the anger I had felt during that long night, seemed to have disappeared during my sleep. Certainly there were many things yet to be clarified, discussed, decided, but once reason resumes her hold on the reins there is hope for any situation. I got out of bed and walked to the window in my bare feet. My ankle still felt stiff and sore.

It was raining outside—a thin, misty foggy drizzle. The streets were beginning to come to life in the grey, electric-lighted city dawn. Below, people would be sitting at counters in brightly lit drugstores, drinking coffee, eating sweet rolls, their



faces still heavy and personal with sleep. The vision made me shiver. I could feel the chill in the streets, the pain to both the eyes and the spirit of bright lights in the early morning, the utter desolation of sitting on a counter stool, alone, drinking coffee and staring at a hundred miniature boxes of cold cereal. I returned to my still warm bed, pulled the blankets close about me and began to plan my day.

I would call Ethelyn later in the morning, listen to whatever explanations she cared to make to me, accept whatever apologies she cared to offer. I felt sorry for Ethelyn that morning, sornier for her than I did for myself, I believe. In a sense, she was not at all responsible for the unhappy mess we found ourselves in. Ethelyn was a sick woman, it seemed to me, and I intended to hint as much to her and to suggest that she seek some kind of psychiatric help, if at all possible. How foolish of me to have taken her fitting and inconsistent accusations seriously! But it is hard to realize that an apparently normal person is, in fact, not normal in many realms of thought and feeling.

As for Roy, he was my husband. We had taken each other for better or for worse. The worse was upon us now, but vicissitudes can often strengthen marriages as well as weaken them. Perhaps Roy and I would emerge from this trouble with an increased understanding of and regard for each other. At any rate, I decided a complete and honest exploration of facts and feelings was certainly the next step to be taken. And I would begin by confessing to Roy what I had never confessed before—my odd and disturbing relationship with Jerry Gates during the war. In many ways it was the ideal starting point for the many hours of discussion that lay ahead of us.

The shower had stopped running now, and I could hear Roy brushing his teeth in the bathroom. I knew that he would comb his hair next and then come into the bedroom for his clothes. Was it a variety of stage fright that was making my

stomach thrill? I believe it was, for once he had appeared and I was on stage, so to speak, it disappeared.

"Good morning," I said, and my voice sounded just as normal as I felt.

"Hi."

"You're up early."

"I have an appointment with Hughes at nine o'clock."

"I didn't know that."

"I guess I didn't tell you." Roy put on his shorts, looked over at me and smiled weakly. "Did you get to sleep finally?"

"I slept about three hours, I guess."

He took a clean white shirt out of his suitcase and began to unbutton the front of it.

"Roy," I said (and the stomach thrill returned for a second), "I've been thinking most of the night. And I've come to all sorts of conclusions. But the main one is this: The trouble with us is that we've never been completely honest with each other. I'm not *accusing* you, understand. The same applies to me too. What we have to do is start over, go back, make a clean breast of everything. Both of us. We have to repair our foundations if we hope to have any kind of marriage in the future. And incidentally, this morning I can see the sense of what you said about divorce last night. Divorce would be cowardly, the easy way out of this situation. We can fight this thing through—talk it through, I mean—and come out safely on the other side and perhaps be better people for it. I really believe that."

"Good," he replied. "I agree." He selected a tie and walked over to the mirror that hung above the bureau.

"Agree to what?" I asked when he didn't continue.

"Well, to what you just said about divorce."

"And how about the making-a-clean-breast-of-things part?"

He smiled at me ruefully in the mirror. "I think our breasts are pretty clean at this point, don't you?"

"No, I don't. I think we have a tremendous lot to talk about together."

"That may be," he said. But then, almost as if he were talking to a child, he added, "But let's save it for the train, huh?"

"Why should we save it for the train? We're always 'saving' things. And then they never get said, and we go on and on, and communication between us just stops eventually."

His tie knotted at last, he turned to me now and grinned. Yes, grinned. "All right," he said. "What are you longing to confess?" And he began settling his shirt into his pants, buckling his belt.

The implications of that grin (the too speedy return to normality) infuriated me. His reluctance to take my new insights seriously, the relentless way he continued to dress—obviously eager to be off to his business appointment, obviously unwilling to sully his fresh white shirt with any more personal explorations—set the fire of rage burning in me once again.

"Sit down, please," I said. And then very deliberately: "Did it ever occur to you that I might have had a love affair at some time in my life too?" I knew I had picked the wrong moment to discuss the subject of Jerry Gates, yet now that I had begun I could not turn back.

The grin left Roy's face at that and was replaced by a rather foolish smile. At last he said, "No."

"I didn't think so. Roy, I'm telling you this because I think it's important for you to know that I'm not completely naïve about these things."

"What things?"

"About extramarital relationships. I want to tell you that during the war I had a love affair too. With a man named Jerry Gates."

Roy turned, looked at me sharply, his face very tense now. "Go on," he said. "Now that you've started."

And so I told him all about Jerry Gates. But when I had finished he merely frowned in a puzzled way and said, "Well, what are you getting at? I mean, what's the point of the story? My impression is you didn't go to bed with him."

At that I looked Roy straight in the eye, smiled a little and said coolly, "I'm sorry, but your impression is wrong."

He continued to hold my eyes with his for what seemed like a full minute. Then he looked away and said the cruelest thing he's ever said to me: "I don't believe you"

If he had cut off all my hair and paraded me naked through the streets, if he had knocked me down and kicked me in the mouth with a hobnailed boot, he could not have hurt me, humiliated me, more. And what do you do when you're hurt and humiliated? Lie there and whimper? Sometimes. But not unless the spirit is completely gone from you.

"Roy," I said in cold fury, "I loathe you." Then the anger started rolling up my back in hot waves and I all but shrieked at him, "You can't conceive of my man finding me attractive enough to go to bed with. Is that it? Dear God, what a fool I've been! But no more. Roy Harkness, no more! I've taken enough insults from you to last me two lifetimes. And no more!"

"Ruthie, for God's sake! Love your own rings phoney, that's all. Jesus! I find you attractive enough to go to bed with. What else do you want?"

My throat was so tight I couldn't reply.

"I don't believe you because to go to bed with this Gates character you'd have to be a totally different kind of woman from what I know you are."

"How do you know what kind of woman I am? Oh, yes. I'm good little, sensible little Ruthie! Ruthie, the good sport. Ruthie who never does anything wrong. We can count on Ruthie. Do anything you want to Ruthie. She'll forgive and forget and carry on and muddle through. And no matter what, dinner will be on the table and your shirts ironed and that's all you care about. Well, you can believe what you want to believe. But in that case you may have quite a time with this one: *I am not going back to St. Paul with you!*"

"Why?"

"*Why?* Why do you think?"

"I'm sure I don't know. What do you intend to do?"

"I haven't decided yet. I'll think of something."

Roy sighed, glanced at his watch. He came over and sat down on the bed and tried to take my hand, but I snatched it away. "Ruthie, I'm sorry as hell about everything. You know that. We've got a lot to get straight between us yet, but we will. Only right now I've got to go, if I want any breakfast before I see Hughes."

"Heavens! I wouldn't want you to miss your breakfast."

"Let me order something for you. Have it sent up. Take a bath. Relax. Just try not to think this morning. I'll be back by noon. We'll have lunch. And we'll have the whole trip back home to hash this stuff over."

"I told you I wasn't going back to St. Paul with you."

"And I don't believe that either." He leaned over and kissed me on the forehead. Then he stood up, put on his coat and hat. "I'll see you around noon," he said. And he left.

It's no accident that the words "angry" and "mad" are used interchangeably by many people. That morning a rage possessed me that was far beyond any anger I had ever known. It was the closest thing to madness, I suppose, that I will ever experience, and the effects of it hung about me all that day, like the effects of a drug. In fact, I felt as if someone had injected a drug into me—a drug that made my hands and feet tingle, my cheeks burn, my eyes water, my heart pound. My mind went racing along a hundred miles an hour, yet I could not focus on a single idea, make even the most rudimentary plans for the day ahead of me. I could only wander distractedly around the hotel room, smoking, brushing my hair, staring at the hideous turquoise print in the drapes and repeating over and over to myself, *No, I am not going back to St. Paul with you!* I couldn't even cry.

It was during the very height of this madness (I was stretched out across the bed trying desperately to cry) that Ethelyn called. How different things might have been had she resisted her im-

pulse to telephone at that particular moment. Or how different they might have been had she been sober! But life seems to be made up of just such unfortunate juxtapositions of events, and it's quite useless, I suppose, to speculate or to mourn once the cards have been dealt.

At any rate, when I answered the telephone I could scarcely hear her at first. Her voice sounded far away, as if she were not speaking directly into the mouthpiece. And her speech was slurred. She wanted me to come out to her apartment immediately, I gathered. All was crystal-clear at last, she said. I must come out to her apartment at once and talk to her, because she was not in love with my husband, Roy; she was in love with her own husband and intended to be a good wife to Phil from now on.

"You mean Clarence, don't you?" I said coldly. Her repetitious, maudlin wanderings disgusted me.

"Yes. Of course Clarence. 'Scuse me, Ruthie. Phil's dead, isn't he?" She paused, gave a mirthless laugh. "God, I make myself sick. Come 'n talk to me, Ruthie."

"You make *me* a little sick too, Ethelyn," I replied. "I don't really care to come out and talk to you. Not now. Not in your condition."

She didn't reply; instead, she began to cry softly.

"Look, Ethelyn. Pull yourself together. Don't drink **any** more—do you understand? Go to bed now and sleep it off. I'll come out and see you tonight."

"You won't be here tonight."

"Yes I will. I'm not going back to St. Paul with Roy."

"Why?"

"Now, just exactly why do you think?"

"Ruthie, don't leave Roy," she sobbed. "Come and talk to me first. You're so stupid, Ruthie."

At that I lost all patience. "Ethelyn," I said, "I've had just about all I can take for now. I will *not* come out there and listen to a lot of drunken drivel. I said I would come this evening

when you're sober, and I will. And I might add that quite a few things have become crystal-clear to me too. Among them, the fact that the quicker you get yourself into the hands of a good psychiatrist, the better off we'll all be!"

There was a long pause after that, and then I heard the receiver click: Ethelyn had hung up on me!

I was furious. What right had *she* to hang up on *me*? For that matter, what right had she to get drunk, to cry and carry on as if *she* were the injured party? *She* and Roy were certainly a good pair! Before long, at the rate things were going, they would be expecting *me* to apologize to *them*!

I lit a cigarette and began to pace around the room. Well, we'd just see about that! If my refusing to return to St. Paul with Roy accomplished nothing more than to make them realize that it was *I*, not *they*, who had reason to be upset, that would be enough. Let Roy return to St. Paul alone. Let him spend the seven hours on the train in solitary contemplation of the events of the past two days—or of the past two years, for that matter. Let him offer to Mother and Dad and the children whatever explanation of my absence he could bring himself to give. Perhaps then he would realize the gravity of the situation between us. I would stay in Chicago long enough to underscore the point I wished to make. And furthermore, I would enjoy myself during that stay!

Ethelyn's call had accomplished one thing, at least: it had stopped the frantic racing of my mind, allowed me to focus my attention at last on the day ahead of me. All at once I felt full of a new energy and courage. I was *actually* not going back to St. Paul with Roy!

A flush of excitement began to spread through me then, and I tidied up the hotel room and took a hot bath and put mascara on my eyelashes. I dressed carefully in my new suit. Then I sat down and wrote a note to Roy in which I said that I was indeed staying behind in Chicago, that I had several blank cheques with me plus the hundred dollars Dad had given me,

that he could tell the family whatever he liked to explain my absence, and that I would return exactly when I felt like returning and not before. Then I put on my new hat and left the hotel in high spirits.

But outside it was still drizzling, and a penetrating marrow-chilling wind from Lake Michigan crept up my coat sleeves and down my neck. Since I could not risk encountering Roy, I could not eat in the hotel coffee shop. I tensed all my muscles against the shivers that engulfed me and began to walk north in search of another place in which to have my breakfast. My stomach felt as if it were a great echoing empty cavern; my ankle began to bother me again; and before I had walked a block, my high spirits were replaced by a damp and chilling gloom. Was I out of my mind? What in the world would I do all alone in Chicago on a cold, drizzly December day? What would I find to occupy myself for even one day—let alone a week or a month? There was nothing to do at that point, however, but walk on.

At last I stopped at a cafeteria. I chose a table close to a hot radiator, and I made myself eat a hearty breakfast—oatmeal and prunes and bacon and eggs. And gradually the chill left my bones and the hunger left my stomach and the damp gloom left my spirit. I bought another cup of coffee, smoked another cigarette, and it began to seem then as if I might be equal to the day ahead of me after all. One day at a time, I told myself. One day at a time . . .

Well, then. First of all: I would go to Marshall Field's and see if I could get an appointment to have my hair done. Done? No, styled. Perhaps bangs with gold streaks or some such. Whatever the hair stylist thought would be right for me. And perhaps I'd have a manicure, too. The last time I had had a professional manicure was before a New Year's Eve party in 1957! I smiled a little bitterly to myself. It was high time I indulged myself not only in a professional manicure but also, perhaps, in a shopping trip that did not include crew socks or



ironing-board covers! Yes, after the beauty salon I would buy some earrings, some bath salts, some pale-blue velvet house slippers and a new lipstick. Then, late in the afternoon, I would have a martini in the dimly lit bar at the Palmer House. I had never been in a bar alone, but there were many things I had never done that I intended to begin doing at once. Yes, even if it happened that some man at the bar (I saw him as a well-dressed, slightly red-faced conventioneer of some sort) offered to buy me a drink, I would accept. And if he offered to take me to dinner I would accept that invitation too!

How long I sat there, planning and thinking, I don't know. I do know that I drank three cups of coffee and that the ash tray in front of me held the stubs of five cigarettes, and that all at once I noticed people with full trays (people on their lunch hours!) wandering among the tables looking for empty seats. I realized then that I was being inconsiderate and stood up to leave.

I had put on my coat and was pulling on my gloves when it happened: a tall, thin, loose-jointed man with hair the color of his ill-fitting trench coat came ambling toward my table. Why, it's Jerry Gates, I thought. Why, this is fantastic! Am I in a dream? Maybe this whole thing is a dream, all these past days. Nevertheless, my heart began to hammer hard and the words "Why for heaven's sake! Jerry Gates!" were all formed, ready to emerge from my mouth. But when the man deposited his tray on my table I saw that he was not Jerry Gates. We looked directly into each other's eyes, and if I hadn't turned at once, completely shaken, and headed for the cashier, I believe he would have engaged me in conversation.

To be sure, this kind of hallucination experience has happened to everyone at some time, and it had happened to me before. I could even remember several occasions when, inexplicably, I had actually encountered the subject of my "hallucination"—an experience which is inclined to make one believe in telepathy or extrasensory perception or something of the sort.

Naturally, there are rational explanations for all such phenomena, if one has the time and inclination to analyze the situations. But it wasn't until I was sitting under the dryer in Marshall Field's beauty salon that I felt sufficiently calm to attempt such analysis. Even then, it wasn't a genuine analysis of the phenomenon itself, it was more an analysis of why I should have been so disturbed (and, yes, excited) by this pseudo encounter with Jerry Gates.

It was obvious, of course, that he had been in my mind very recently; and obvious, too, that since he lived in Chicago it would not have been at all impossible to encounter him in just such a cafeteria. But what did seem inexplicable to me was my growing desire to see him. It was fantastic, really; after thirteen years it was altogether unlikely that he would even remember me. And yet, in spite of myself, I sat there under that dryer telling my story silently to Jerry Gates.

In retrospect, I can see why I longed to unburden myself to Jerry that day: I was looking for the same comfort he had given me on that long-ago night in Jimmy's Place. I wanted him to tell me again that I was a little fool, that Roy loved me and that life, for me, would always be good. But at the time I had no inkling of why I had such an overwhelming desire to see Jerry; instead of exploring the reasons for this irrational wish, however, I spent my time trying to convince myself that a telephone call to the newspaper office where he worked would be the wildest kind of folly. In the first place, he would undoubtedly be unable to place my name. (Ruth Harkness? From St. Paul? Yes, *Ruthie* Harkness—Lake Minnehaha—a long long time ago, at the end of a war). And then, finally, the forced heartiness: Well, for heaven's sake! This is a surprise! (And an embarrassment, too, no doubt! Jerry had very likely remarried, and his wife would be charmed, I was certain, by Ruthie Harkness from the end of World War II turning up suddenly in her husband's life.) And even if he remembered me, was glad to hear from me, was still unmarried—what then?

My hair stylist, a small blonde girl with very cold hands, was combing out my hair now. I saw her glance at me in the mirror with some curiosity; and I realized, all at once, that I had been behaving like a woman in a trance. I had absolutely no notion of what kind of coiffure she had created for me!

I smiled at her in the mirror then. "I really have the most dreadful headache today," I said.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Can I get you an aspirin?"

"Just a glass of water, please. I have some aspirin in my purse."

She brought me a glass of water, and I actually swallowed two aspirin tablets for a nonexistent headache!

At last she gave my head a final pat and smiled at me expectantly.

"It's lovely," I said.

It wasn't lovely. I was disappointed. I looked exactly like a somewhat artificial version of myself.

"I believe I'll skip the manicure today after all." I wrinkled my forehead slightly to indicate my headache had figured in my decision.

And she nodded understandingly.

What, actually, had figured in my decision, I did not know. I had lost all enthusiasm for my projected shopping trip; I had no other plans for the day; and yet I felt I could not endure the leisurely pace of a manicure. There simply wasn't time: I was in a great hurry to get somewhere, it seemed, but *where* I had no idea. I paid my bill, tipped the girl too much and wandered out into the store—through house slippers and jewelry and cosmetics. Nothing interested me. Finally, in desperation, I decided to go to the Art Institute.

But on my way to the Art Institute I lost my enthusiasm for that plan too, and I stopped at a drugstore instead. I bought a magazine, sat in a booth, ordered a cup of coffee and a piece of cherry pie. The pie had terrible shiny crust and great red cherries that would have looked more appropriate on a wom-

an's hat. The lights in the store seemed much too bright; the merchandise on the counters seemed to shriek at me—all the home-permanent kits and shower sprays and vitamin displays and brightly painted animals that quacked or ting-a-linged when pulled along on wheels. I felt like crying, like putting my head down on the table in front of me and sobbing wildly; the way a little child does. There was nothing to do, nothing whatever to do, nothing at all to do—for the rest of the day, or the rest of my life! I could, of course, have returned to the hotel; or gone to see Ethelyn, or even taken the late-afternoon train to St. Paul. But I did none of these things. I merely sat in that booth, staring through my tears at a large picture of barbecued beef on a bun.

So deep was my despair that eventually it frightened me. I must do something, do *anything*, quickly. Before I collapsed. All alone in Chicago. When one is all alone, one cannot afford such despair. And so, as a kind of desperate remedy, I decided at last to call Jerry Gates. At the very worst he would make a lame excuse not to see me, and I would have yet another humiliation to hug to my heart. But if he consented to see me, he could save me—I knew he could save me—from falling into the pit that yawned at my feet. I was ready to make the gamble.

I took a supply of change with me into the telephone booth and looked up the number of Jerry's newspaper in the unwieldy Chicago telephone book. I wrote the number on a slip of paper. I felt as outlandish, as out of touch with reality, as if I had just assembled equipment to commit a burglary or a murder. But I called the number. There in the stuffy telephone booth, with the garish store outside, I dropped my dime into the proper slot and spoke rationally and calmly with the switchboard operator. I was connected, as if by magic, first with the city desk and then with a voice that said, "Gates." It was that simple; it had been that simple all along.

My mouth was so dry I could hardly speak. "Jerry Gates?"  
"Yes."

I cleared my throat, wet my lips. "This is Ruth Harkness," I said. "From St. Paul, Minnesota. You probably don't remember me at all, but—"

He interrupted me. "Ruthiel!" he said, and there was genuine pleasure in his voice. "For the love of God! Of course I remember you."

Never in my life have words sounded as sweet to me as those words did that afternoon. Jerry remembered me, was glad to hear from me!

"What are you doing in Chicago?" he continued. "Where are you?"

"I'm in a drugstore." I laughed a little, cleared my throat again. "I'm just down for a few days—visiting Ethelyn. You remember Ethelyn."

"Sure. I ran into her a few months ago, as a matter of fact."

"I know. That's how I knew where to call you. We got to reminiscing the other night and today I had a little time to kill, and I thought, Why not call up and say hello?"

"I'm glad you did! Look. I'd like to buy you a drink. Have you got time? I'll be through here in half an hour or so."

"Why, yes. I guess so. That would be lots of fun. Very gay."

"Good!" He gave me the address of a bar then and told me to meet him there in forty-five minutes. "Or would you rather I picked you up somewhere?"

"No. That will be fine. I have a little shopping to do yet."

And so we agreed to meet in forty five minutes.

I have no idea how I spent those forty-five minutes. I know I bought a pair of large silver earrings in one of those ninety-nine-cent jewelry stores. And I know too that as I tried them on, in some ladies' rest room somewhere, a wave of fright invaded my stomach. But I found the fright rather pleasurable, if that makes any sense; and I wandered out of the rest room wearing the earrings. And eventually I arrived at the bar Jerry had designated.

It was one of those plain bars that men seem to like: half

empty, dim, brown, comfortable, with the bartender and three men (still wearing their hats and coats) desultorily watching television. I remember feeling very uncomfortable about entering such a place alone, and I hesitated at the door. Then I saw Jerry emerging from the men's room; and simultaneously he caught sight of me.

"Ruthie!" he called, and he came up to me and took both my hands. "My God! I can't get over it! Here. Come on. Sit down." He put his arm around my shoulders and steered me to a booth.

"Jerry, it's so wonderful seeing you. You look very well."

We faced each other across the booth and smiled. I pulled off my gloves. "I seem to be soaking wet," I said. "What perfectly terrible weather you have in Chicago." I shivered. "I'm freezing."

"We'll fix that right away," he said, and called to the bartender, "Ed, how about a couple of Hennessys over here?"

"Sure thing." Ed smiled. I noticed he had been regarding me with a great deal of interest.

Jerry turned back to me. "Get some brandy going in your veins, and then we'll have a martini. I seem to remember martinis were your drink."

I laughed. "Oh, actually anything's my drink, Jerry. I really don't care too much for liquor. I just drink to be sociable, you might say. And martinis always seem so—well, appropriate." I could hear myself rattling foolishly on, but I was afraid to risk a silence. The revival of old friendships usually requires some pump priming.

But Jerry roared with laughter. "Ruthie, you're wonderful. You're just the same. I should have known you drank martinis because they were appropriate. You and seven tenths of all martini drinkers in the U.S.A. Only the others would never admit it."

Ed arrived with our brandy, and Jerry turned to him. "Ed,

this is an old old friend of mine, Mrs. Harkness from St. Paul, Minnesota."

Ed nodded at me and smiled, and Jerry continued, "She's the only honest martini drinker you've ever met."

Ed smiled again indulgently, punched Jerry on the shoulder, and returned to the bar.

Jerry picked up his little glass and raised it in the gesture of a toast. "Well, Ruthie, here's to—" Then he looked me full in the face for the first time and smiled. "The hell with it. It's good to be having a drink with you, Ruthie."

"Thank you, Jerry. And the same to you."

"You haven't changed a bit. I can't get over it."

"Neither have you. You do look very well, you know. As if life had been treating you pretty well."

"Life has been treating me in its accustomed way. You can't kid life, you know. I get what I deserve—no more, no less."

"What do you mean?"

Instead of replying he smiled a little cryptically.

I made another try. "You like your work? Being a newspaperman seems just right for you, somehow."

"It is."

"Well, what do you do, exactly? I mean sports, or just plain reporting, or what?"

"Rewrite," he said. After a pause he looked me full in the face again and smiled a little sheepishly. "Let's both cut it out, eh? What are you doing in Chicago, Ruthie?" He fumbled in his coat for a cigarette and found one, offered one to me.

"Well, I came down to visit Ethelyn, actually. Roy—my husband—comes down often on business and I just decided to hook a ride with him this time. I don't get away often, you know. Maybe once in two years, without the kids."

He had hold of my eyes now, in the old familiar way; and he nodded and let the smoke ooze out his mouth. It was unsettling.

"Anyhow," I went on, "Roy goes back this afternoon, and I just decided what the heck—why not stay down a few days longer and get my Christmas shopping done in one fell swoop. You know. It gets so piddly otherwise. So that's what I'm doing in Chicago," I finished somewhat lamely.

He nodded. Then he reached across the table and covered my hand with his. "Ruthie, how did everything turn out finally?"

"What do you mean? Just fine, I guess."

"How many kids have you got now?"

"Three. Teddy and two girls."

"What are their names? How old are they?"

"Well, Linda was thirteen in August. And Barbara is ten."

"What are they like? What's your life like? Do you belong to the P.T.A.? Do you go swimming at the Y in the mornings? You know—tell me about yourself."

I laughed a little weakly. "Jerry, for heaven's sake! It's my turn for a while." I hesitated. "For instance are you married now? And also, I have no idea what 'rewrite' actually involves."

He stared at me for a long time. Then he said quietly, "All right. I'll go first. No, I am not married. Or at least, no, I will not be married in several months." He paused, picked up a book of matches and turned it around in his hand. "You see before you a man with a unique talent. I have a unique talent for marrying women I can't live with."

"What do you mean?"

"I've run through two more wives since you saw me. My third wife took to the woods only three weeks ago."

"Jerry! Oh, no! I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. No one else is. You know something, Ruthie? I was thinking about you a couple of weeks ago. Wondering why I can never seem to bring myself to marry a girl like you. She always turns out to be some helpless bedraggled little blonde who—Do you know, Ruthie, not one of my three wives could bake a pie? Or, for that matter, anything more



complicated than a nice plate of Campbell's tomato soup."

"Jerry, I *am* sorry. I'm sorry because you sound so bitter."

"I am bitter. But we're working at it. We're working at it." He lit another cigarette, putting a period to the end of that paragraph.

He grinned at me, then motioned for Ed. "You know what I'm going to do?" he asked. "I'm going to order two sidecars now. Because if ever there was an inappropriate drink it's a sidecar." Then to Ed, "Make us two sidecars, Edward. We are going to explore uncharted territory."

"Just as you say, Buster."

"I'll bet you've never tasted a sidecar, have you, Ruthie?"

I confessed I hadn't. I was puzzled and a little annoyed with him. We had just begun to talk—really to communicate, that is—and suddenly and inexplicably he had turned the conversation back to the banal level of drinks. I decided not to allow it.

"What do you mean by '*we're* working at it,' Jerry? I hope you mean there's a chance you'll be able to save your marriage—you and your wife."

He hesitated for a moment. Then he smiled. "By '*we*' I mean me and my psychiatrist."

"Oh, Jerry. I'm sorry I was so nosy. Forgive me."

"Forgive you? Why?" He laughed outright now. "It's all right, Ruthie. There's nothing I like better than talking about my psychiatrist. What I said to him, what he said to me—always edited, of course, to make a good story."

Our sidecars arrived, and this time Jerry raised his glass in a formal toast. "To disorder and early sorrow," he said; and he smiled such a crooked smile that I suddenly found my eyes filling with tears. He noticed them at once. Smiling derisively at himself, he began to hum "Hearts and Flowers." "Such a sad case I am."

But the tears were welling up in my throat now too, and I couldn't seem to stop them. I kept sniffing and blinking and

laughing a little and sipping my sidecar in an effort to turn them off.

At last Jerry took my hand again, looked at me searchingly and said, "What's the matter, Ruthie?"

"Nothing," I half whispered. "I must be getting tight."

"Not on two drinks."

I shook my head, sniffed and swallowed, and tried to laugh. "I guess you make me cry. The first time I saw you, you bought me a beer to cry in. Now it's a sidecar." The laugh came out sounding like a silly giggle.

"Don't tell me your husband has run off with another woman again," he said jestingly. "Here. Blow your nose and tell me all about it." He handed me his handkerchief.

But instead of blowing my nose I buried my face in that handkerchief which smelled of the laundry and Juicy Fruit gum and began to sob. I could feel Ed's curious eyes on me, and yet I could not stop crying. The sobs were gathering force and momentum, like huge sea swells, and I stood up and left the table hurriedly and found my way to the ladies' room. It took me fifteen minutes to compose myself. When I returned to the table I felt weak, but almost peaceful, the way you feel after a fever has finally broken.

Jerry had ordered another sidecar for me, and I took a big swallow of it, lit a cigarette and smiled at him apologetically. "Don't you have to go back to work or something?"

"No," he said soberly. "Not any more today."

After a long long silence in which he just watched me, his eyes full of concern, I said, "Jerry, Ethelyn and Roy have been having an affair for over two years." Then I went back to the beginning and told him the whole story.

Life, of course, doesn't have any neat beginnings, and the whole story is always impossible to tell. But I tried. And he sat there, listening, turning the matchbook around and around in his fingers. I told him everything. Even the slap in the face, the broken glass in the hotel bathroom. And Jerry just sat

there, listening, nodding, making encouraging or sympathetic sounds, occasionally touching my arm compassionately when my words threatened to dissolve into tears again. At last I had told him nearly everything there was to tell; now it was up to him.

He looked at me and said soberly, "I still don't understand this running-away business, though, Ruthie. You say you're not going to leave Roy. So why didn't you go home with him? Why this empty gesture? Because that's what it is, you know."

"He didn't believe me. That's why."

"Didn't believe what?"

"Didn't believe anything I tried to tell him about myself. Certainly didn't believe I'd have the nerve to stay behind in Chicago."

"What did you try to tell him about yourself that he didn't believe?"

I didn't answer; and I suppose the consternation that must have shown on my face made Jerry realize that the missing answer was an important part of my story. What? What didn't he believe?"

"Jerry, I can't answer that I'd look like a fool"

"Why? You've told me some pretty foolish things already, and I don't think you're a fool. Partial confessions are worse than none, you know. You'll go on forever silently confessing the part you withheld, and you'll never have any peace."

Still I said nothing except: "Jerry, can we have one more drink? Then I'll go." With all the drinks I had had, I still felt completely sober.

"Of course." He signalled again to Ed. "Then we'll go on and get some dinner, you mean. It's getting close to dinner-time, you know."

"You don't have to take me to dinner."

"For God's sake! I know I don't have to take you to dinner. I want to take you to dinner. I might even take you dancing after dinner, just for old times' sake. That is, if you quit acting as if

I were a terribly nice little Boy Scout doing his good deed for the day. I don't help old ladies across streets."

"Don't you, Jerry? I think you do." Oh, the lovely hazy melancholy that was settling on me suddenly. I sipped my sidecar and gazed at him in silence for a long time. "I think you're about the kindest, most understanding person I've ever met. I don't think you can helping old ladies—I mean, I don't think you can *help* helping old ladies across streets. You're that kind of person—kind and understanding."

Jerry flicked my chin with his fingers and then took my hand. "You're cute, Ruthie. I've never seen you tight."

"Jerry, I'm not tight. I'm just beginning to feel normal. I was 'way down below sea level, and now I'm just about up to sea level. Jerry, I want to thank you for saving my life. I might have done something terrible today if it hadn't been for you."

"Like what?"

"Oh, I don't know. Something terrible. But thank you anyhow. Thank you for everything."

"You know something?"

"What?"

"You look beautiful standing there at sea level."

"I do?" I remember giggling then. "With the wind and the rain in my hair? Thank you again, Jerry." I could have sat there forever in that booth, holding hands with Jerry, watching the lights in the darkening streets outside, feeling snug and warm, away from the cold wet wind, feeling that life would work itself out some way. In some way, life would work itself out, and for now I would just sit and enjoy myself for a few minutes—just while I was waiting for life to work itself out.

"Jerry, do you really think I'm beautiful at sea level? No. That's not what I mean. What I mean is this: Do you think I'm attractive? I know I'm not beautiful. But I mean, one time I remember you said you liked me because I was so 'decent.' I remember that word. Decent. What I'm trying to

say is this: Is that the only reason you like me, because I'm so decent—Oh, wow! What fishing for compliments! Don't answer!"

"No. That's not the only reason I like you." He kissed the palm of my hand lightly. "Shall I tell you some of the other reasons?"

"No. I couldn't believe them. I was only fishing for compliments. Do you have a cigarette? Mine are all gone."

He put a cigarette in my mouth and lit it, and after I had inhaled deeply, then exhaled the smoke, I found myself saying, "I'll tell you what Roy wouldn't believe about me. He wouldn't believe I had an affair with you during the war."

"Ruthie!"

But I didn't care any more. "Yes. I told him a big lie. Just to get even with him. And he didn't believe me. He didn't even know you, but he didn't believe me. He just couldn't conceive of anybody finding me attractive enough to go to bed with." I giggled again, but the giggle turned into a little sob, suddenly. "Now I'm going to go," I said, starting to slide out of the booth. "I confessed everything, and now I can't eat dinner with you because I can't look at you any more. Was there ever such a fool as me?"

"Ruthie, sit down!" He pulled me roughly back into the booth, held me firmly by both shoulders and looked straight into my eyes. "You're not going any place. Not now."

"Why?"

"Now, why in the hell do you think?" He squeezed my hands hard. "Do I have to say I love you?"

"Oh, don't say that, Jerry. You don't love me. You know that. You're just saying it because it fits in right. You shouldn't do that. You should say what you feel, not what you say. No. I mean, not what you think you should feel. You should say what you feel, not what you think you should feel. You know who made up that saying? My husband. Roy." Oh I must have been tight; I must have been really very tight. Suddenly I be-

came aware of Ed behind the bar. "We'd better leave, Jerry. Ed will think I'm terrible."

"Ed will think you're perfectly terrible," he agreed. "Let's go." He helped me with my coat, plopped my hat playfully on my head. I adjusted it carefully, and I caught Ed's eye and smiled at him, half apologetically. But he smiled back at me warmly, and as we left the bar he even called cheerfully after us, "Good night, folks."

For some reason his farewell fortified me against the cold and drizzling evening. I felt, all at once, quite at home in Chicago.

We took a cab to Jerry's favourite Italian restaurant. We rode in silence all the way to the restaurant: there seemed to be nothing more to say to each other. I rested my head on Jerry's shoulder; he held both my hands in his, tightly; and occasionally he kissed my hair or my ear. I felt as if I could drift forever in that pleasant, warm haze. Our silence continued more or less through dinner too. We just sat there, looking at each other and smiling. I don't even remember what we ate.

But I do remember that as we sat there over our coffee it suddenly occurred to me I had promised Ethelyn I would see her that evening. I shook myself a little and sighed. "It must be almost nine o'clock," I said. "If I'm ever going to get out to Ethelyn's tonight, I should be going."

"Ethelyn's?" he cried. And his eyes looked so surprised, so hurt, that I reached for his hand and kissed it lightly.

"I did promise her, you know."

"I know," he replied a little sadly, and he turned my hand and kissed my wrist softly. "I wish you hadn't." He kissed my wrist again, then tilted my chin and looked into my eyes, half smilingly. Then he dropped my hand. "But you must do as you wish."

*But you must do as you wish.* The words were like a revelation to me. Yes, yes! For once in my life I must do as *I* wished—not as Roy wished, or as the children wished, or as Mother

and Dad or the president of the P.T.A. wished. Good little, sensible little, reliable little Ruthie—Ruthie, who always stayed home to finish the ironing, Ruthie, who always decided against the sinful-sounding perfume, the outrageous swinging earrings!

I turned to Jerry then and said, "You know what *I* wish? I wish *not* to go to Ethelyn's tonight!" And of course, shortly thereafter, Jerry called for the bill, and we returned to my hotel.

In the final analysis, the act of love is at once the most important and the most unimportant thing in a relationship between a man and a woman. I haven't always known this, and I suppose my one experience outside of marriage does not warrant such a generalization. Nevertheless, I feel this is probably true for many more people than will admit it. What has gone before, what comes afterward, are the important parts the real essence of the affair. The act itself is analogous to the party one attends, the movie one sees, the dinner one eats in the company of the other person. It can be wonderful moving, beautiful, fun, gay, completely satisfying. Or it can be disappointing, ridiculous, empty, boring, depressing, completely unsatisfying. And the persons involved in the experience are no more and no less responsible for the quality of the experience than they are for the quality of the movie, the party or the dinner. The feelings, both psychic and physical, that Jerry had always been able to arouse in me, led me to believe that going to bed with him would at least equal, if not surpass, some of the purple passages I had read in books. But the fact of the matter, quite simply, was this: I found I much preferred going to bed with Roy.

There are many satisfactions, however, besides the purely sensual one, which a woman may receive when she goes to bed with a man—subtle satisfactions that men can't seem to understand.

"I'm sorry, Ruthie. It wasn't any good for you, was it?" Jerry said at last, as we lay there quietly in the dim light.

"Don't say that. Of course it was."

He shook his head. "Sometimes it's all right the first time. Sometimes it isn't."

There was a note of hurt and apology in his voice that made me sad. I felt infinitely tender toward Jerry, happy that I had given him pleasure, glad, and I guess a little proud, that he had wanted me. I felt wonderful, lying there on the bed, and I tried to tell him about it. "It doesn't matter, Jerry. What does that matter? The important thing—the lovely thing—to me is that you wanted to go to bed with me. And that I dared to go to bed with you at last. For once in my life, I did something I felt like doing, not what I thought I should do. Not what was right and proper."

Jerry didn't answer me for a long time. He got up and brought each of us a cigarette; then he lay back on the pillow, one arm under his head. Finally he said, "It wasn't what you wanted to do, Ruthie. The fact it wasn't any good for you shows that."

"It doesn't!" I interrupted him heatedly. "You know enough about sex to know that's not true! It's nine-tenths habit. Being used to the other person. Besides, this wasn't an ideal setting. I mean, it is possible, after all, that Roy might still be in Chicago. Not probable really, but still possible—"

"All right," he interrupted me and caught hold of my hand and kissed it. "You may be right. We can argue that forever. But Ruthie, please be clear about this. Very clear. What you wanted to do—want to do right this minute—is to tell your husband. That's what you want to do. And you mustn't! It will wreck things if you do. You'll really have a mess on your hands then."

"Jerry!" I cried. "Why are you saying all this to me?"

"Because you're going to go back home on the train first thing tomorrow morning, and as soon as you get the kids to



bed you're going to sit right down and tell him all about this."

"And what makes you think he'd believe me, even supposing I were foolish enough to do just that? I've already told him about you, and he didn't believe me."

"He'll believe you this time. But let me tell you, you won't get the result you expect. If we had gone to bed out there at the lake, he would have believed you. But the effect would have been quite different from the effect you'll get from his believing an account of *this* evening."

I sat up and hugged the blankets around my neck. I was beginning to shiver. "I don't know at all what you're talking about. I love you, Jerry, in a funny kind of way, and I always have. And now at last I've had the courage to do what I wanted to do fourteen years ago. And just because it didn't turn out to be a perfect poem or something the very first time, does that matter? Not to me it doesn't. What matters is that we've found each other again after too many years. And our feelings for each other seem to be quite unchanged. That's what's important, Jerry. That's what's wonderful!"

"Ruthie," he said without looking at me, "you're making a lot of words. Too many words."

"What's the matter?" I cried. "What is it? You're being cruel!"

Now he turned to me and touched my cheek very lightly and smiled a little sadly. "Not cruel," he said. "I'd like to see you happy, really happy. That's all." Then, after a short silence, he whispered to himself, "Christ!" and lay back on the pillow and covered his eyes with his arm. Finally he said without uncovering his eyes, "Let me ask you something. It's important. Why didn't you go to bed with me fourteen years ago if you wanted to?"

"You didn't ask me."

He gave a short, snorting laugh. Then: "I repeat my question if you care to answer it."

"I'll try," I said at last. "I see what you mean." I thought

very hard, and we remained silent for some time. I wanted to give him a completely honest answer. Finally I said, "I really don't know, Jerry. Maybe it was because I didn't know what life was all about at that point."

"Exactly. Translated, do you know what that means? It means you didn't know then that everyone was doing it, that some of the nicest people did it, that your husband, your strong-minded friend, Ethelyn, were not above it, that there were all sorts of precedents for such actions—"

"Stop it!" I choked, and I turned over and buried my face in the pillow and began to cry.

But he turned to me and pulled me into his arms and held me there like a little child. "Ruthie, Ruthie, I'm a son of a bitch! Excuse me. But it was all wrong tonight, and I feel like hell. I want you to be happy. Can you believe that? For some unknown Christly reason it's important to me that you be happy. Not with me. Just happy." He stopped and shook me a little. "Do you believe that?"

I nodded.

He stroked my forehead. "Stop crying, please—if you can. Listen to me. Ruthie, all I'm trying to say to you is that you've got to quit living by other people's rules. Other people's rules and feelings. That's why it was all wrong tonight."

"What do you mean?"

He sighed. "Yeah. I'll try to explain." He was silent for some time. My sobs had quieted, and I simply lay there, waiting for the explanation of his baffling mood and words. At last he said, "The Seventh Commandment: 'Thou shalt not commit adultery. As it stands, that's not your rule, or my rule either. It's Moses' rule, if you get what I mean. But it can be your rule or my rule: we have to decide for ourselves. How? Yes, that's the neatest trick of the week. You know, it's a helluva lot easier to buy someone else's rules—just buy the whole job lot. All ten Commandments plus all the tips in all the magazines and newspapers in the country about how to have

a successful love life, be beautiful, win friends, influence people, be a charming hostess, decorate a dark living room. You get what I mean? Sure, you can get through life just fine following all those rules, because in order to become rules they are bound to have a good deal of common-denominator-type wisdom in them. If you're lazy, or if you lack courage, or—maybe more important—imagination, then go ahead and fix up the dark living room just the way the magazine tells you to. All your friends will probably think it looks fine. But I can tell you right now: Don't plan on being real happy with that room yourself. And by happy I don't mean gratified, proud or comfortable. I mean, quite simply—happy. Ruthie, do you see what I mean?"

"I don't know. 'Happy' is such a vague word."

"Oh, the hell with 'happy'! Do you see what I mean about the rules? There are no rules one can live by in this century. At least, no rules that the likes of you and me and half the people we know can live by. And so we have to make up our own rules as we go along. All I'm saying is this: 'Thou shalt not commit adultery' has a helluva lot of wisdom in it. But it has no wisdom at all unless one considers it carefully for one-self—in the light of the given situation and one's own feelings."

"But, Jerry, now I don't understand you at all! That's exactly what I did. I considered the rule carefully—and honestly—in the light of the given situation and my own feelings."

He shook his head vigorously. "No!" he said. "What you considered was a somewhat more recent rule that goes something like this: It's perfectly all right, and sometimes rather interesting, and always good one-up-manship to commit adultery. The act itself has not yet been completed for you—not until you tell someone about it. You didn't come to bed with me out of love; you came out of wounded pride. And that's what makes me so goddamned sick and mad at myself. That I didn't have the sense to see it in time—didn't want to

see it. And I let you deceive yourself, and whenever you deceive yourself you get hurt. I don't want you to get hurt. That's why I'm being what you call cruel. But it isn't cruelty. Can't you see that?"

"Not by your words," I said. "Only by the look in your eyes. Jerry, I know you don't mean to be cruel, but you're talking absolute nonsense. I know you feel as strongly about me as I do about you. I said earlier that our feelings for each other remain unchanged, and that, for me, was what has made this evening so wonderful . . ."

Oh I remember those words so well! Because in the very next moment, before I had time to complete my sentence, the telephone rang. The sound went through my body like an electric shock, and the words—"what has made this evening so wonderful" seemed to echo in the room and make a hideous counterpoint with the ringing of the telephone. "Oh, Lord!" I whispered. "Who can be calling?"

Jerry took my hand. Answer it and find out. It's all right."

"I'm afraid. Did anyone see you come up here? Was that woman sitting at the desk by the elevators? The floor clerk?"

"No."

On the fourth ring, Jerry removed the receiver and handed it to me. "Hello?" I said at last in a weak voice.

"Ruthie! Where in the hell have you been?"

It was Roy!

"Roy. Where are you?"

"I've been trying to get you since four o'clock this afternoon. You even walked off with the goddamned hotel key!" His voice rose almost hysterically and broke on the word "key."

"Darling! Where are you? What's the matter?"

"I'm out at the hospital right now. Ethelyn tried to kill herself this afternoon."

"What?" I squeaked. Now everything was clear: it was all a nightmare.

"Ethelyn took an overdose of Seconal. I found her this afternoon."

"Is she dead?" I breathed.

"No."

"Roy, shall I come out there? Do you want me to come out there?"

"Goddamn it, Ruthie. Quit fooling around, will you? Get your coat on. Get out here."

"All right. Where?"

He mentioned the name of the hospital. "Take a cab. I'll meet you in the lobby." He banged down the receiver in my ear, and I crumpled in the middle of the bed, convulsed with chills.

Jerry wrapped the blanket around me, held me very tight until my teeth stopped chattering. "Ethelyn's dead?" he asked, when my shivers began to subside.

"No. Not yet." I took several deep breaths to try to get my circulation going again. "She took sleeping pills. She's at the hospital. I have to go there now."

"Not yet. Lie still a few minutes. Get hold of yourself first."

"All right."

I lay there for what seemed like a long time with Jerry's arms holding me tight. Everything seemed very clear to me: I would get up, take a warm shower, get dressed, make the bed, see that every trace of Jerry was removed from the room; I would go down in the elevator (with its signs about the notary public and the beauty salon), have the doorman get me a cab, ride the cab to the hospital, go into the hospital lobby, which would smell faintly of ether and boiled potatoes . . .

"Ruthie," Jerry interrupted my thoughts and his voice startled me—I had almost forgotten his presence. "Ruthie, this isn't your fault, yours and Roy's. Keep that in mind."

"If it hadn't been for us, it wouldn't have happened."

"Yes it would." He was silent for a moment. Then: "It's

what happens when you start having too much truck with ghosts."

"Ghosts?" I said absently. I couldn't seem to keep my mind on anything except the shower I must take, the ride downstairs in the elevator, the cab I must find.

"Yes, ghosts. Most of the trouble people make for themselves is caused by ghosts. That includes us. Tonight I mean."

"I suppose so," I said, absently again.

"No you don't. You have no idea what I'm talking about. You're not even listening."

Suddenly I became quite annoyed with him. What a completely egotistical and unfeeling person he was! His little epigrams, his little wise sayings about life, his eternal ironies and pessimistic viewpoint seemed to me at that moment like the self-pitying whines of a spoiled child who craves and demands constant reassurance and attention from his mother. No wonder three women had found it impossible to live with him! I pulled away from him, swung my feet to the floor. "I have to take a shower now."

He caught my hand, in an effort to detain me. "I wish you could hear what I'm saying, Ruthie. It's important."

"The only thing that's important to me right now," I said, "is to get out to that hospital as fast as I can. I don't understand you Jerry. Ethelyn is dying I'm half out of my mind with worry and you expect me to go right on listening to your philosophy. Sometimes I think you have no feelings at all."

He looked up at me his eyes full of astonished hurt.

"Excuse me Jerry" I said relenting a little at the sight of the hurt. "I'm really terribly upset. I know you understand."

But all he said was: "I'm sorry, Ruthie."

When I emerged from the shower, Jerry was dressed and sitting on the arm of the chair, staring out the window. "Now it's snowing," he said. He had made the bed carefully, had, indeed, removed all traces of himself (including his Camel cigarette butts) from the room. I was somehow touched.

"Thank you," I said, going up to him and putting my head on his shoulder for a moment. "For tidying up, I mean."

"Sure." Then he pulled me into his arms, almost roughly, and looked straight into my eyes. "Will you promise me some things, Ruthie, before I go?"

"What?"

"First, don't tell your husband about this evening."

I sighed. "Do you really think I'm such a fool?"

"Will you promise it?"

"Well, of course I'll promise it!"

"Good. Now: will you try to remember what I told you about other people's rules?"

"Of course. I don't think it was really anything very new to me, you know. I think you would have seen that if we'd finished the conversation."

"Perhaps," he said. He looked at me hard for a moment, then kissed my forehead gently and released me from his arms. "I'll go now," he said, reaching for his coat and hat.

"We can go down together. It will take me only a moment to dress."

"No. I want to go right now."

"Well, all right, if you feel that might look better. I'll call you in the morning to let you know about Ethelyn, though. I don't know what time exactly—"

"Don't call me, please," he interrupted.

"But why not? I know this has upset you too, even though you don't show your feelings. I didn't mean it, really, you know, when I said you had no feelings."

He came back to me now and took hold of my shoulders. "Ruthie," he said, "it doesn't really matter to me whether Ethelyn lives or dies. Matter to my life, I mean. In any case, I'll pick it up in the obituaries, you know. And if I don't, so much the better."

"Jerry, you know you don't mean that!" I cried.

"Yes, I do. I don't want you to call me—or even send me a

Christmas card. I can't insist that you quit playing hopscotch with ghosts, but I can get out of the game myself. Do you understand?"

"Of course," I said coldly. "You've made it quite clear, I think." My humiliation seemed complete now: in the same room, at approximately the same hour and wearing the same bathrobe, I was once more being slapped in the face by a man I had trusted as implicitly as I had trusted Roy. I had given Jerry not only my body but also my heart, all my thoughts and feelings. And he had taken them, played with them for a few hours, then handed them back to me with the news that the "game" was not for him. "Good night, Jerry," I said, offering him my hand. "Good luck in the future."

He looked at me very hard for a moment, then smiled his crooked smile. "Goodbye, Ruthie," he said. "And please . . ." he began; but instead of finishing his sentence, he turned and left the room. I listened until I heard the doors of the elevator open and close. Then I began to get dressed.

I suppose it was the hurt Jerry had inflicted on me that numbed a little my fears about Ethelyn; or perhaps it was my fears about Ethelyn that numbed Jerry's hurt. At any rate, I dressed hurriedly now, thinking of absolutely nothing but the zipper on my skirt, the buttons on my blouse. I applied my lipstick with a steady hand, combed my hair and left that hotel room once more, remembering this time to leave the key at the desk.

By the time I reached the hospital a peculiar calm daze had settled over me. Nothing, it seemed, could shock or disturb me now. I was ready to hear anything, believe anything, bear anything. Had the cab driver turned out to be a gorilla in a pink petticoat, I would have accepted it almost naturally, the way you accept such facts in dreams. Therefore, when I entered the hospital and saw no sign of Roy, I was neither surprised nor particularly upset. Perhaps he was upstairs with Ethelyn, who had just died. Perhaps something had happened to Roy



himself. Or perhaps I merely had the wrong hospital. I sat down in a ridiculous, high-backed, Tudor-type chair.

A man with a little boy asleep on his lap sat in an identical chair across the room. Two old women and an old man huddled together on a bench near me, talking Polish or Lithuanian or some such language. A life-sized portrait of a man wearing a dark-blue business suit and steel-rimmed spectacles (one of the hospital's benefactors? an honoured surgeon) stared down at me. A huge vase of russet chrysanthemums graced the long, ornately carved table that stood, senselessly, in the middle of the floor. Very soon now I would go up and speak to the cross-looking woman behind the information counter. Very soon. The hand of that clock clicked backward, then forward, minute by minute, the way the clock in the grade school I attended had done. I watched it, fascinated, for several minutes and decided I would speak to the cross-looking woman after five more clicks.

But before I had counted the five clicks Roy walked out of an elevator with a man who, from a distance, looked exactly like the man in the life-sized portrait, but who, it turned out, was not that man. Roy spotted me at once, and the two men walked toward me. "Ruthie, this is Dr. Grant. My wife."

We shook hands. "How is she now?"

"Well—" he considered—"I'd say her chances are good. She's responding well. It's too early to say anything definite, of course."

"Is there anything we can do, Dr. Grant?" I knew there was nothing we could do; it was the only thing I could think of to say.

"Not a thing," he replied. "Not a thing except wait. I don't believe she'll wake up much before tomorrow afternoon. Her husband should be here before long."

"I finally got hold of Clarence a couple of hours ago. He thought he could get a flight out tonight," Roy explained to me.

The doctor discussed flight possibilities, then, between New York and Chicago, told us his opinion of the situation at Midway Airport, told us a mildly humorous anecdote about a misunderstanding he had had once with an airline stewardess, then told us to go home and get a good night's sleep and not to worry. After that he bade us good night and disappeared behind a door marked "Staff."

I sat down on the bench that had been vacated by the Polish threesome, and Roy sat down beside me. His skin looked like putty; his eyes were a little bloodshot. He sat leaning forward, his elbows on his knees, staring straight ahead. We said nothing at first. The man with the sleeping child on his lap remained in the same attitude of resigned waiting across the room. We watched a young couple, the wife obviously in the beginning stages of labour, cross the lobby.

"What do we do now?" I asked at last.

Without looking up Roy said, "I think we should meet his plane."

"Do you know what flight he'll get?"

"I know what flight he hoped to get."

"All right. Let's try."

By the time we reached the airport it was after midnight. The flight was reported one hour late.

"You'd better eat something, Roy. I don't suppose you've had any dinner."

"All right."

We left the airport then and walked through the falling snow to a nearby restaurant. Roy ordered bourbon and food for himself, coffee for me. It wasn't until the coffee and bourbon arrived that I was able to say, "Tell me what happened, Roy."

He nodded, took a large swallow of his drink and began, almost in a monotone, to recount the events of the past twelve hours. He had returned to the hotel at noon. After some trouble at the desk about getting into the room when I was

out, with the key, he had found my note, but had still been unwilling to take my plans seriously. He had waited for me at the hotel until the last possible moment, had finally given up, packed his bag and left for the train station. But when they called his train he had realized he was much too uneasy about the whole situation to leave. He had checked his bag in a locker and called the hotel several times. And all at once it had dawned on him that I would be at Ethelyn's. He had called Ethelyn's apartment then, and when he received no answer he had decided to go out there and wait until one or both of us showed up.

As he walked into the courtyard he saw lights in her living room and was therefore made uneasy when no one answered his ring. (I could see him standing in that damp, steam-heated vestibule, pushing the button next to the mail box marked "C. Campbell," waiting with his hand on the doorknob for the answering buzzer. I had done the same thing yesterday at approximately the same time.) It didn't surprise me, therefore, to learn that at last he had rung the superintendent's bell.

In the hall outside Ethelyn's apartment they had heard the radio talking away, and the superintendent had gone in with him. They had found Ethelyn lying across one of the beds in her bedroom. Her lips were blue, her breathing so slow and shallow that Roy had been certain she was not simply asleep. He had gone at once to the bathroom, looking for clues to her condition, and there he had found, lying on the ledge above the bathroom basin, her empty Seconal bottle. He had found her doctor's telephone number listed near her telephone, and the doctor had ordered an ambulance immediately. Roy had ridden to the hospital in the ambulance, had seen her wheeled off to Emergency and had then begun his search, by telephone, for Clarence and for me.

"Roy, what did you tell him?" I interrupted.

He looked at me blankly. "That Ethelyn had attempted suicide. Why?"

I shrugged faintly. "Nothing. Go on"

Roy was silent for some time, cutting his meat, chewing and chewing. At last he reached inside his suit coat and removed a folded paper from the pocket. "I found this in the living room while I was waiting for the ambulance. I went in there to turn off the radio and the lights. All over the room she had scattered stuff from Phil she'd been saving. A lot of that flimsy kind of junk—overseas souvenirs—I sent you from India. This thing was lying on the desk. You can read it. It's addressed to you."

I took the note from him with trembling hands.

"Dear Ruthie," it read. "You're right. I'm no good. I'm bad. I'm drunk. I'm everything bad. Here is what I wanted to say: (1) I don't love Roy. (2) I don't love Clarence. (3) I love Phil. (4) I thought it was very clear but it isn't. (5) I might as well give up. Maybe I will. Small loss. (6) Be nice to Clarence. Tell him the Sartre belongs to the assistant in the department—the one with the bad teeth. I can't remember his name."

I was appalled. I handed the note back to Roy, too stunned for a minute to say anything. "She went out of her mind, didn't she?" I whispered at last.

He made a sound that was half sigh, half sob. "I don't know, Ruthie. I don't know."

Suddenly I was terrified; I had never seen Roy so close to collapse. What would I do—what on earth would I do—if Roy collapsed before me in tears? My strength was almost gone, the numbness I had felt in the cab on the way to the hospital, that had seemed to enable me to bear anything, had begun to disappear. Yet I was well aware of the fact that the next twelve hours would require more strength from me than any other twelve hours I had ever experienced. If Roy began to cry now, I would simply have to give up. And if I gave up? The whole world, as I had known it until now, would fall down about my ears!

Therefore I reached over and touched Roy's hand and said,

"Roy, don't! Don't torture yourself. You're blaming yourself for this, and that's absurd. It's one of those things with a thousand causes. I've known Ethelyn a lot longer than you have, after all, and I'm convinced now she's been a sick woman for some time. Really sick. She needed help terribly. And because of that fact, there's no question any more of forgiveness. I forgive her; I forgive you; the whole awful mess had its roots 'way back in the war years. One might better blame Hitler and Hirohito, you know." I smiled a little. Roy was pulling himself together, had resumed eating. I began to feel a slight resurgence of my strength.

"I guess this is no time to think about *whys*, is it? It's no time to think about ourselves at all, in fact. We'll just leave it at Hitler and Hirohito for now. As far as we're concerned, I mean." When he didn't reply, I added, "O.K.?"

Then, for the first time, he smiled a little and said, "Sure." And I knew that he would not cry now. The worst had passed. But there were still other frightening things to be faced; and after a few moments, when Roy did not seem inclined to speak, I said, "Roy, what are we going to tell Clarence?"

"Tell? I've already told him."

"What? Only that she attempted suicide. That may be enough for the telephone, but not in person. He'll want to know why, all the details that led up to . . . it."

"Not necessarily. He's not a woman."

"Of course he will! Roy, you're just closing your eyes because you don't want to face it. But it's something we have to face, and right now, before we meet his plane."

"You mean we have to construct some kind of alibi to present to him?"

"Roy, don't!" I cried. "You know what I mean. I just don't know whether it might not be kinder to do just that. Certainly I know that honesty is always the best policy. But sometimes it's not always the easiest, or the kindest—"

"You're damned right it isn't!" he interrupted. "And I

might add that sometimes it's even a little difficult to know exactly what honesty is."

"No. That's just evading the issue, to talk like that."

"What's the issue?"

"Do we tell Clarence a story, in the interests of his feelings, or do we tell him the truth?"

"Look, Ruthie: What the hell is the truth? In this or in any situation? Is it making a clean breast of things? And if that's what you mean, what makes you think you can make a clean breast of things even if you try? It's impossible. Your reality will never be someone else's reality. Oh, Christ! What I'm trying to say is this: There's quite a bit of difference between honesty and confession. One is not necessarily being honest when one confesses, when one tells the whole truth and nothing but the truth. I've yet to hear of a confession that did anything but create further complications."

I was becoming annoyed with Roy and his convenient rationalizations. "Evidently you've never heard of either the Catholic Church or psychoanalysis," I said.

He must have missed the sarcasm in my voice, for he continued earnestly: "That's an entirely different matter. Confessing to either institution is entirely a matter between you and your own immortal soul—or ego. But to cleanse your breast via another human being—a husband or wife or friend or what have you—that's quite another thing. And you'd better be pretty sure of what you're doing, and why, before you proceed. No, Ruthie. Honesty is always the easiest policy in cases like this. It feels so damned good to be honest, to relive the shameful events and then get absolution. But do you know something? It's impossible to get absolution from another individual. You can get absolution only from yourself, or from God, depending on what you believe. And it's not a very easy thing to get from either source. That's why honesty—honesty with one's fellow men—has always been touted as such a good policy. *Policy*, please note. You can't mix honesty

with policy and come out with anything besides self-deception, or worse. And that's why I'm not going to tell Clarence a damned thing—no lies and no truth."

"Roy, open your eyes," I said coldly. "Fifty thousand words still won't hide the simple fact that we must decide right now what to say to Clarence."

"Ruthie," he replied, "the poor bastard has the rest of his life to live, and I hope to God Ethelyn has the rest of hers to live too. And therefore we're not going to tell him one damned thing. No lies, no truth. And if you don't know what I mean by that, then, please, just keep your mouth *shut!*" His voice shook, and his hand trembled as he lit a cigarette. I could see that he was adamant, that there was nothing more I could say.

We sat in silence for several minutes. Then he glanced at his watch and called for the check. "We'd better get under way," he said at last.

Clarence Campbell looks like one of those middle-aged, distinguished, urbane, slightly odd men one sees so often these days in advertisements for expensive shirts, imported British woollens, or vodka. In other words, he looks almost too good to be true: the neat, attractive moustache, the well-kept, greying hair, the intelligent eyes, the ironic mouth. He has a slightly disfiguring scar under one eye (the result, I understand, of a Fourth of July accident in his youth), but the disfigurement supplies exactly the right finishing touch to his otherwise too perfect appearance.

However, that night, as he hurried into the terminal (not expecting to see us, of course), he looked far from his usual urbane and perfect self. His clothes, even his hair, looked dishevelled, and there was a slackness about his face, a vacant bemusement in his eyes that suggested, somehow, a Skid Row bum. But when he caught sight of us waiting, his face almost magically snapped into focus. He came toward us, his hand

outstretched, smiling his usual charming smile. "How nice of you to be here!" he said. "How are things going?"

I was somewhat abashed: he might have been welcoming us to a cocktail party or preparing to show us the sights of Chicago. I glanced at Roy, but Roy's face showed no surprise. He shook Clarence's hand and replied, "Every reason to be hopeful, I think." And then he reported to him our conversation with the doctor. As Clarence listened, the slackness returned to his face momentarily—but only momentarily.

"I appreciate what you've done, both of you," he said. "It must have been awful for you."

Roy shook his head, shrugged a little. "I'll get your bag," he said. Clarence sat down on a bench then, and I sat beside him. I couldn't think of anything to say except: "It'll be all right, Clarence. I know it will be all right."

He nodded, then tried a little smile that faded even before it had fully appeared. "It's been awful for you, Ruth. I shouldn't have insisted that you come. I'm sorry."

I was baffled. "But I wanted to come! There's nothing for you to feel sorry about. Please don't give that side of it another thought. You couldn't foresee that this would happen."

"No, not this," he agreed. "But something."

"But you mustn't talk like that. You mustn't punish yourself for some—some imaginary crime."

Now he smiled sadly at me. "All right," he said. "I won't say any more. The only thing now is . . ." he swallowed hard, and I saw tears appear in his eyes, "is Ethelyn," he said finally.

I touched his hand gently, and he took mine and squeezed it hard. Then he stood up, and I saw that once more he had snapped his face and his whole body back into focus. "I'll see to a cab now," he said in a matter-of-fact voice.

We accompanied Clarence to the hospital and sat once more on a bench in the lobby (quite deserted now) and watched the hand of that clock click backward, then forward, backward,



then forward. While Clarence, on the fourth floor, spoke with nurses and the resident physician.

"He's a very strange man, isn't he?" I said after a long silence.

Roy only shrugged. He seemed unable to remove his gaze from the vase of russet chrysanthemums.

"He kept apologizing to me for all the trouble this has caused us. Doesn't that seem like a strange reaction to have when your wife may be dying?"

Roy looked at me now and frowned a little. Then he returned his gaze to the chrysanthemums. "I don't know. Maybe not," he said at last.

But suddenly the most outlandish question flashed through my mind: Had Clarence known about Ethelyn and Roy and hoped that my presence in Chicago would put an end to their affair? It's the kind of question, of course, that one can never ask directly. One can only look for the answer oneself, and it is never possible (at least for me) to believe such an answer implicitly. Thus, even now, I cannot say definitely that Clarence had an ulterior motive when he urged me to come to Chicago. The strain I feel whenever I am with him may have nothing to do with this outlandish (or perhaps not so outlandish) hypothesis of mine. All I know is that behind his urbane and charming exterior Clarence seems always to be apologizing for himself, to be asking for punishment for some unknown crime. But perhaps he has always been this way.

At any rate, his apologetic behaviour was very much in evidence when he returned to us in the lobby after perhaps half an hour. His face looked pale, and I could see a muscle twitching under one eye. At first, when he spoke, he sounded completely calm and composed. "I really believe everything is going to be all right. Her breathing is better, they say. And also her colour. I think we have good reason to be hopeful." But then he placed a hand on my shoulder and said in a voice that seemed close to tears: "Ruth, you're exhausted. I can't tell you how

sorry I am about all this. You're not going to be very rested and refreshed when you get home from this trip—"

"Clarence, it doesn't matter," I interrupted. "Really it doesn't!"

"All right," he said at last. "Thanks." Then: "But I think it's time we all got a little sleep. Or maybe we should have a drink first. A nightcap. I have a bottle of Scotch in my bag."

Roy looked up at him appraisingly. Then he stood up. "Good idea," he said. "Let's take you home, then."

Clarence must have seen the look of appraisal in his eyes, because he flushed a little, then wet his lips. "Thanks again," he said. "I don't know how much more I can ask of you people. But thanks for this."

And so, at three o'clock in the morning, we returned, with Clarence, to that haunted apartment. The air was stale and hot. An ominous silence (almost as if we had interrupted a conversation among the chairs) seemed to emanate from all the rooms. Clarence switched on the light in the hall, opened his bag, removed the bottle of Scotch, insisted on taking our coats and hanging them properly in the closet. "Please come in." He indicated the living room. "Sit down. Make yourselves at home. What do you like—branch water or soda?" He switched on a light in the living room.

And all three of us gasped silently. There was no sound; the gasp was audible only in Roy's eyes, in the little shock that went through the base of my spine, in Clarence's frozen posture. The living room remained, of course, in the same disorder in which Roy had discovered it that afternoon.

An empty Scotch bottle, an empty gin bottle, a broken glass, overflowing ash trays, a large cigarette burn in the carpet near the couch, a mélange of silver filigree jewelry, painted brass ash trays, carved ivory gods, gawdy squares of filmy material, letters, letters, letters everywhere: on the floor, on the desk, on the couch, near the radio, V-mail letters and airmail letters and letters marked "Free." It was the sight of all those letters

that made me so sick, letters some of which I knew were addressed to Lake Minnehaha. Perhaps half the contents of a marriage—or a life!—were scattered about that living room, and the sight made me so sick I had to leave the room.

And so I found myself once more sitting on the closed toilet seat in Ethelyn's bathroom. What—oh, what in the name of God—had happened to all of us, Mary Louise, Ethelyn, myself? Lives that had begun so simply, so full of hopes, plans, expectations of happiness, had become slowly and imperceptibly twisted, stunted, deformed, like blighted plants. And now one of us was dead, the other might die at any moment. Only I remained, sitting on that closed toilet seat, holding my head in my hands and staring into the terrible abyss at my feet.

Then Roy called at the bathroom door, "Ruthie, are you all right?"

"Yes. I'll be out in a minute." I remember thinking (and wondering, also, if I were becoming really hysterical), A cave, a cave, I want to go to some dark cave, because even a locked bathroom is not safe for tears or terror! But at last I stood up and forced myself to go back into that awful living room.

During my absence the grisly evidence of Ethelyn's despair had been cleared away. (I learned later that Roy had gone about this task almost at once, and that Clarence, after collecting the empty bottles and, for some reason, one of the little Hindu gods, had gone out to the kitchen.) When I returned to the living room I found Roy standing before the window smoking a cigarette, and Clarence putting ice and Scotch into three glasses. I sat down on the couch. "Excuse me," I said. "I should have done the tidying up."

Neither man replied, but Clarence smiled at me, almost tenderly, and handed me my drink. "Roy, yours is on the rocks. Right?"

Roy turned from the window, nodded, accepted his drink from Clarence and sat down beside me on the couch. Clarence found some cigarettes in a box on the desk, gave me one, lit it,

returned the box to the desk, stood indecisively in the middle of the room, swirling the ice cubes round and round in his glass. Then, looking at us with eyes that were full of shame and hurt and embarrassment, he said, "It's pretty clear what happened, isn't it?"

I was afraid to reply. Perhaps it was clear; perhaps it wasn't; I couldn't be sure what he meant by "what happened." But Roy, evidently, was sure, for he replied with only a moment's hesitation, "It seems very clear to me." And then he added, "And if she pulls through, I think you can be very sure it's over. Finished. Cured. If you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean," Clarence replied. "I also agree with you. Pretty strong therapy. But if she lives now, things will be different. I know it." Then he added, after a pause, "I, also, will be different."

And at that moment the telephone began to ring!

There could be only one reason for a telephone call to the Campbell apartment at three-thirty in the morning. I began to tremble. Roy sat up very straight, then slumped and whispered to himself, "Jesus!" But Clarence very slowly and deliberately set his glass on the coffee table, walked to the telephone and said in a steady voice, "Campbell speaking."

But it was not the hospital calling after all. "Yes. Yes. Yes," we heard him say, his voice rising a little with each word. And finally: "One moment please, operator." He returned to the living room, his face grimacing grotesquely. "Ruth, it's your mother," he said. And then he sat down at the desk, put his head on his arms and gave himself up to large, silent, heaving sobs.

I left the room and walked, in a daze, to the telephone.

"Mother? What is it? What's happened?"

"What's happened?" she cried. "What's happened to you? Darling child, what's wrong? Why didn't you come?"

"Oh, Mother! Oh, heavens! I'm sorry. I forgot all about calling."

"But you were coming home tonight. I've been so worried I couldn't sleep. We all went down to meet your train, and you weren't there. It's not like you to do this to me, Ruthie."

"Mother, it's been an awful day. There's been too much." What should I tell her? Suddenly my eyes were full of tears; my throat became tight; I wanted nothing more than to tell her *exactly* what had happened to me. I wanted to bury my head in her lap and cry and cry and have her tell me what I should do to make my life sensible and happy once more. But even as I let this longing for comfort wash over me, I knew that it would be impossible to tell her anything—anything at all, except a lie. I knew what she would say if I told her the truth. I could hear all her words, the tone of her voice, her instructions and warnings to me, and finally, her icy request to speak to Roy. There would be no comfort for me here, nothing but more troubles and complications.

And so, for the first time in my life, I told my mother a deliberate lie! Not an edited story, not a judicious evasion, but an outright, calculated lie. "Ethelyn is in the hospital," I said. "She had her appendix out this morning." And I went on to describe some elaborate but fictitious complications, our frantic efforts to locate Clarence, our obligation to remain with Ethelyn until his arrival. "She's still on the critical list, Mother," I concluded.

"But darling, how awful for you!" she cried. And then, as an afterthought: "And for poor Ethelyn too, of course. How awful for all of you!"

"Yes. We're just about to go to bed now. We're all pretty well exhausted."

"Of course you are! Will you be able to sleep, dear? I don't suppose you have any sleeping pills with you. You're exhausted and tense and of course you won't be able to get to sleep. And then you'll wind up sick. I think you're so silly not to take sleeping pills with you. I'd never go off on a trip without them."

"I'll be able to sleep."

"Well, if you can't, try some hot milk. That helps sometimes. And a warm bath. But above all, just put the whole day out of your mind now. Ethelyn will be all right. I'm sure of it. They accomplish such miracles these days. And of course appendicitis complications don't really require miracles. They're just routine, nowadays, with all the wonder drugs."

"I know."

"And so the important thing now is for you to get some rest, baby. Get some rest so you won't get sick and spoil your whole vacation. Have you had fun?"

"Oh, yes."

"That's good, dear. And you'll be home tomorrow?"

"Yes. Unless we call. The same train you met tonight. Only don't bother to meet it, in case we take another one."

"Of course we'll meet you. Just call, sweetheart. From the station. And, oh, Ruthie, Teddy was so funny tonight when you didn't come on the train. 'Maybe Mom and Dad have decided to ditch us for good,' he said. 'It wouldn't surprise me in the least.' Then Linda said—and, oh, she's a strange one, darling. You're going to have your troubles with her. I want to have a long talk with you about Linda when you get home. But anyhow, Linda said, 'I'd like it if they ditched us for good.' And Dad said to her then, 'You like living with your old Nana and Pops?' 'I wouldn't live with you then,' she said. 'I'd live in our house and have the whole house for myself.' What do you think of a child like that? Of course, she didn't mean it for a minute—"

"I think she did, Mother. And I think she's just the one who could do it." The tears were filling my throat again, but this time they were tears for my children. If only I could see my children, I thought, the nightmare in which I had been living for hours—or perhaps days or weeks—would dissolve into bright morning sunlight, familiar curtains and my own warm pillow. "How's Barbara?" I choked at last. "Did her cold develop at all?"

"I kept her home from school for two days. And I kept the old steam kettle going in her room. And lots of fluids, of course. She loves grape juice—Nana's grape juice, not store grape juice. And we had a great time with *Rose in Bloom*. Ruthie, do you remember *Rose in Bloom*?"

"Yes," I said. "But is she all right now?"

"Fit as a fiddle," she replied. "I let her go back to school today."

All I could say was: "Good."

"Darling, you sound awful. Now, I want you to stop fussing. Take a warm bath, some hot milk, and go to sleep. Do you understand? And now I'm going to say good night and get some sleep myself."

"Mother, I'm really sorry I forgot to call. But under the circumstances . . ."

"Of course I understand. Don't bother your silly little head about *that* now. Please greet Clarence for me. And give my love to Roy. And to Ethelyn also, when you see her in the morning."

"I will."

"Good night, sweetheart. We'll go to lunch in Minneapolis when you get back, and have a nice long talk."

"Good," I said. And for the first time in my life, also, I realized that it might be possible to have a nice long talk over lunch in Minneapolis with my mother.

"That was a helluva thing for us to do to Harriet," Roy said when I returned to the living room. "Is everything all right?"

"Fine," I said. "The kids are fine. Did you hear all the conversation, Roy?"

"The important parts."

"Was it all right?"

"Yes!" he said emphatically.

"Maybe I'll never tell her the truth."

Roy only looked at me and smiled faintly. "It wasn't a lie, Ruthie," he said.

Clarence, who had been pretending not to hear our conversation, turned from the window now and said, "Let's have one more short one, and then I think I'll find a cab for you people."

"A cab?" I said.

"Yes. You'll sleep better in your hotel. You can sleep as late as you want to. I think you'd be disturbed here. I won't sleep."

"But we *want* to stay with you," I said

"No," he replied. "I'm all right now." Then, after a pause: "Do you understand?"

"Yes," Roy said, and he stood up. He poured himself another drink, then went into the hall and telephoned for a cab. When he returned to the living room he finished his drink in two long swallows and found our coats. "We'll see you in the morning—or at noon. Here or at the hospital." He held out his hand, and the two men shook hands but did not look into each other's eyes. Then we left the apartment and waited for our cab in the vestibule.

It must have been four-thirty when we stopped at the desk in the hotel to ask for our key. The night clerk smiled at us—a knowing, indulgent smile, as if we had just returned from the traditional night on the town. Never in my life have I been as tired as I was that night; perhaps I even staggered a little as I walked. "I think he thinks we're drunk," I said. "I think he thinks we've had a big night on the town."

Roy didn't answer, just took my arm and led me to the elevator. When we reached our room I began to undress at once. I put on my nightgown, turned back the bed, and then I stood in the middle of the floor and giggled a little, exactly as if I were slightly drunk. "Mother said to take a warm bath and drink a little hot milk so I wouldn't spoil my nice vacation by getting sick."

I expected Roy to smile, because it was such a typical "Harriet remark," as he would say. But he didn't smile at all. "Get in bed, Ruthie," he said. "I'll rub your back."



He turned out the lights then and rubbed my back gently and soothingly for what seemed like a long time.

"The only thing that matters now is us. Us and the kids," I said at last. "I really have forgiven you, Roy. For everything."

"No more thoughts or talks tonight," he said quietly.

"But you do believe that I've forgiven you? Really believe it?"

"Sure," he said.

"It was all the war, the awful war. None of us are responsible for any of these awful things."

He stopped rubbing my back, kissed my shoulder. "Ruthie, go to sleep now. No more talk. Just sleep."

"All right. Good night, darling." I kissed his cheek. "Thanks. I mean for rubbing my back. I can sleep now."

And I remember thinking, rather hazily, just before I fell asleep, Everything will be all right now, forever and ever and ever. . . . And then, just as when I was a child, the vastness of forever and ever swallowed me up, and I fell asleep

But optimism can be as dangerous as pessimism, and one's wishes, far from having no effect on a given situation, can often radically alter that situation. One types a letter, or rolls out a piecrust, and one thinks, Good, I will reach the end of this page with no erasures; or, For once, this will be a perfect crust with no cold-water patching necessary. But even as one thinks such thoughts, the piecrust tears, and the typewriter begins to write *hte*.

Well, Roy and I woke up at noon, and I had slept so deeply that I felt as if I were being resurrected from the dead. Outside, the sun was shining brightly; the Christmas throngs in the streets seemed full of holiday spirit; and from somewhere, either inside or outside the hotel, I heard "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing," the first carol I had heard that season. I stood there at the window, looking down into the bright and busy street, and it seemed, suddenly, quite ridiculous to worry about Ethelyn, to worry about anything, for that matter.

Ethelyn would live: she would awaken sometime in the afternoon to find the sunlight filling her room. And she would say how glad she was to be alive, how we must all begin our lives anew, and how they would be good lives from now on. And then we would say goodbye to Clarence, and we would catch the afternoon train for St. Paul. And then the Christmas season would be upon us, and with its coming the last wisps of nightmare would vanish and be replaced by familiar Christmas tree ornaments, Christmas cookies, and the radiant Christmas Eve faces of our children.

Therefore, when Roy called the hospital and spoke with Clarence, it was no surprise to me to learn that Ethelyn's progress was even better than had been expected: she was beginning already to stir a little, to mumble a few words.

"As soon as we've eaten something we'll join you," Roy told Clarence. Roy couldn't shave, because his bag was still in the locker at Union Station. It did not take us long to dress, and we ate an omelet in the coffee shop downstairs.

It was, perhaps, one o'clock when I said, "Let's have another cup of coffee. I think we have time, don't you?"

Roy ordered more coffee, and we lit our first cigarettes of the day. "It's like waking up from a nightmare, isn't it?" I said, smiling a little, enjoying my cigarette and my growing sense of euphoria. "She's going to be all right. And so are we. And we're all going to start over fresh. And a great deal wiser, too, I think." When he didn't reply, I added, "I really believe that, Roy. And I also really believe that none of us were in any way responsible for . . . well . . . for all the mess. And so I can say, just as I said last night when you thought I was too tired and shouldn't talk any more—that I forgive you everything. And also Ethelyn."

"Forgive?" he repeated, frowning a little. "I don't like the word 'forgive.' "

"For heaven's sake, why not?"

"I don't think people can forgive each other for anything. I don't think they should. 'Understand' is a better word."

"It's quite another word. One can understand without forgiving."

"No. Real understanding makes forgiveness unnecessary."

Whenever Roy starts to quibble over words, or tries to make interesting paradoxical sayings, it's a sign to me that something is wrong between us—the first far-off thunder on a sultry evening. Usually I can put my finger at once on the source of the difficulty: the words I have spoken that might have irritated him, the concealed disappointment, or hurt, or frustration. But at that moment I had no idea whatsoever why he should suddenly begin to frown and to quibble over perfectly obvious words. It seemed to me that he had every reason to be joyous at that moment: Ethelyn would recover; there would be no difficulties with Clarence, that was certainly clear; and I had emerged from my hysterical state quite prepared to forgive him everything and begin our life anew. I was not prepared, however, to let the quibbling develop into arguing: my feelings of euphoria were not yet strong enough to weather an argument. And so I said, instead of continuing what was, after all, a rather meaningless discussion, "Well, perhaps you're right, dear. It's just that we see these words in different lights. But I think we'd better be on our way pretty soon. We won't have much time at the hospital otherwise."

At this Roy looked up in surprise. "The departure of the afternoon train doesn't decide when we leave. We must wait until she's out of all danger."

And then, of course, I knew the source of the trouble: Roy was still worrying about Ethelyn. But I forgave him this also, for my own confidence in her recovery was based only on intuition, a feeling in my bones. And it is quite impossible to communicate, with any conviction, such a feeling to another person.

At the hospital we found Clarence in the fourth-floor sitting

room, a copy of *Life* open on his lap, an overflowing ash tray beside him on the couch. He looked very tired, but not distraught, and when he saw us he smiled with genuine gladness. "She's going to be all right. I've just seen her."

"How wonderful!" I cried. "When I woke up this morning, I knew in my heart that everything would be all right." I looked at Roy; I hoped he would understand now my seemingly baseless euphoria.

But what I saw in his face destroyed every bit of that euphoria. His eyes were full of tears, and his mouth was smiling in a grotesque way. "Can we see her? Can we talk to her for a few moments?" His voice sounded hoarse.

Clarence, of course, noticed his tears, and therefore he made a great business of looking for cigarettes, offering them and lighting them for both of us. At last he said, "She doesn't make any sense yet. It's not possible, really, to talk to her."

Roy took a deep drag on his cigarette, walked to the window and stood there with his back to us, looking down into the street. "I suppose it will be some time before she's able to talk?"

Clarence shrugged. "I don't know. I think she knew me. She smiled a little." Now he himself smiled and added, "Really smiled! But then she closed her eyes again."

"But the smile is enough!" I cried. "It's such a good sign. For the future I mean. I'd be very surprised if she were able to keep her eyes open for long, or to have any kind of conversation, much before tomorrow."

I could tell that Roy was ashamed of his tears, for he continued to stand silently at the window, his back to us. Perhaps there were still tears in his eyes. Therefore I sat down on the couch and motioned for Clarence to resume his place also.

"You know, Clarence," I began, "I've known F'helyn for a long long time. I lived through the war years with her too, and I want to say that they were pretty traumatic years for all of us. Sure, we managed to live through them and emerge as reasonably whole people. But it's not always easy to see scars and dis-

figurements. What I'm trying to say is that Ethelyn was badly crippled by the war, I think. So were all of us, more or less. I mean, all of us who happened to be at just the wrong age, or the wrong time of life to be able to handle it. Do you see what I mean?"

He nodded.

"Good. I just want you to be as sure as I am that none of us—I mean, neither you nor Ethelyn nor anything except that stupid war was responsible for this . . . this near tragedy. As I said to Roy, the only *people* one can blame in this situation are Hitler and Hirohito. And I think it's important for you to know that too."

I was speaking to Clarence, of course, and I did feel it was important for him to know what I had just told him; but, primarily, I was trying to help Roy compose himself once more. I didn't reckon with Clarence's response to my remarks, however.

He smiled at me now, took my hand and patted it, as if I were a little child "I wasn't at the 'wrong age' for the war, though, Ruth. It didn't interrupt my life: I spent the war very comfortably in Washington. No. I think I know what you're trying to say, and there's some truth in it too. But I'd be kidding myself if I tried to push off all the responsibility on Hitler and Hirohito." He smiled "I wish it were that easy. Because it's very hard, but absolutely necessary sometimes, to look yourself straight in the eye."

Roy turned from the window at that point, his face quite composed now, and sat down in the wicker chair opposite us. But Clarence seemed not to notice him, for he continued our conversation, which was beginning somehow to make me feel uncomfortable. "Do you know something, Ruth? You may find this hard to believe, but it's true: I have never spoken to Ethelyn about my first wife. Oh, yes, she knows all the facts of the case, so to speak. Before we were married, I gave her a brief résumé of my life to date. But nothing more since then.

And I have never asked her about Phil. And she's never told me anything about him. I had no idea that somewhere in our apartment she had stored all those letters and other things." He sighed. "It's not likely, then, is it, that I'd have much idea of what was in her heart. And that's no marriage." He paused, laughed a little, bitterly, and added, "The old maid and her cat. The bachelor and his dog."

I am ashamed to say that I had become so embarrassed by his confessions that I could think of nothing whatever to say to him. It was poor Clarence himself who had to break the gathering silence at last. "Well, now," he said, rather heartily, turning to Roy. "Excuse me. You have a train to catch this afternoon, I think. And I sit here going on and on in this way."

"The train doesn't matter," Roy said. "There's always another train. And I think both Ruthie and I want to see Ethelyn, with her eyes open, say hello to her, before we go. That's more important than catching the afternoon train."

"But perhaps you can do both." Clarence stood up, and we followed him out of the sitting room. "Her room is in the next corridor."

But as we passed the desk where the corridors met, the nurse in attendance there looked up and said coolly, "May I help you, please?"

Clarence explained to her who we were and that we wished to look in, very briefly, on Mrs. Campbell.

"I'm sorry. That's quite impossible," she said. "Mrs. Campbell is not allowed to have any visitors today."

"But these are not visitors in the usual sense," Clarence said, and he explained more fully, then, the circumstances involved.

The nurse only smiled. "I'm very sorry. The or less for Mrs. Campbell are absolutely no visitors. Not even family."

"But I've just seen her—a few minutes ago!" Clarence cried.

The nurse looked annoyed now. "That was quite irregular, Mr. Campbell. I was not aware you had seen her."

"But you mean I'm not allowed to see her again?"

"Of course you'll be allowed to see her again. But I must wait for new orders from the doctor. I'm sure you understand." She stood up now and smiled an official smile. "Mrs. Campbell is doing very nicely now, you know. We don't want to disturb her. I suggest you call this evening and speak with the doctor about when you can see her." She turned another official smile on Roy and me. "I'm very sorry, but I'm sure you can understand, it's for the best."

"Of course," we replied.

There was, quite obviously, nothing more to say or to do. And yet, when we had returned to the sitting room and I suggested that perhaps we should leave very soon, both men looked at me in bewilderment. "But really," I continued, "there's clearly no possibility of seeing Ethelyn this afternoon. We know she's going to be all right now. The nurse has said you can call this evening, Clarence, and I'm sure they'll let you see her then. And as for us, Roy, the only sensible thing for us to do is catch the afternoon train. And we can call Clarence tomorrow from St. Paul. Or maybe we can even call Ethelyn! Anyhow, it's just nonsense to sit around this uncomfortable little room all afternoon. I wish you'd let us drop you at your apartment, Clarence, and see if you can't get a little sleep."

Still they hesitated. Yet, in the end, both men saw that what I had suggested was the only rational kind of behaviour in the circumstances. And so we left the hospital together, dropped Clarence at his apartment, promised to call him from St. Paul in the morning, and arrived at our hotel with plenty of time to pack, to pick up Roy's bag at the station and perhaps to drink a cup of coffee before the departure of our train.

Well, I had forgotten—or, perhaps, not yet really learned—that as long as one lives one must not try to force the future. Any reasonably intelligent adult is quite well aware of the fact that rain may spoil the picnic plans, that at any moment

lightning or a runaway truck may destroy a whole life. But it is a great deal harder to remember that the same principle applies to every moment and every situation in life, no matter how simple or mundane. One must always be ready to change one's plans at a moment's notice. As I began to pack my bag, there seemed every reason to be sure that I would finish packing that bag, drink a cup of coffee, and return to St. Paul on the afternoon train. Ethelyn was out of danger; we had said good-bye to Clarence; we had plenty of time to reach the train.

But as I collected my toilet articles in the bathroom Roy, who had been sitting in silence for perhaps five minutes on the edge of the bed, called to me, "Let's go downstairs and have a drink."

"We don't have time, honey," I replied. "If there's time at the station, you can have a drink while I have a cup of coffee."

Now he came and stood in the bathroom doorway. "Ruthie, let's take the night train instead." Just like that! No introduction, no explanation.

I looked at him questioningly, but he said nothing more—only stood there motionless, expressionless, staring abstractedly, at what? the towel bar in the bathroom? "For heaven's sake, *why?*" I said at last. I knew why, and yet I could not conceal the exasperation in my voice.

"I just don't feel right about leaving yet. That's all. I want to see with my own eyes that she's recovered. You didn't find her yesterday. Didn't see how she looked, I mean. So I suppose it really isn't as necessary for you."

"No. It really isn't as necessary for me! What is necessary for me is to get out of this room, this place. Get home to my children, some kind of normal life. Stop living in this nightmare world!" Quite unexpectedly, I found my eyes filling with tears.

"I know," he replied. "But a few hours one way or the other won't make any difference. We can see her tonight, then catch



the night train and get home early in the morning, and I think we'll both feel better about it in the long run."

"Well, I don't!" His plan was completely unrealistic, even nonsensical. Perhaps I would not have reacted so strongly if there had been any assurance, for instance, that we could see Ethelyn that evening. But there had been no such assurance—no such assurance at all! And so I said, "Roy, I think it's time to stop all this nonsense. You know very well Ethelyn is out of danger now. We've said goodbye to Clarence. The nurse gave him absolutely no promises about tonight. It's up to the doctor. The doctor may very well keep the restrictions on until tomorrow. That would seem logical, and even wise, considering the circumstances. And so, for purely selfish and, I might add, rather suspect reasons on your part, we upset all our plans, disappoint the children, kill more time in this awful room, spend a sleepless night on that train,—you know very well you never sleep on a train. And neither do I. And then that means that tomorrow will be shot too. And for what? No, you're being completely childish about this now, and I don't like it one bit!"

"Why childish?" he asked. "Maybe irrational—I'm quite willing to admit that. But not childish. Is one never allowed any irrational feelings or behaviour? Sure, I want to get home too. See the kids. Get back to normal, forget all this. But you can't *will* yourself back to normal. And there are some things in life that are occasionally more important than getting back to normal."

"Like what?" I interrupted, perhaps too heatedly.

"Like suffering. Or crying, if you like. Or some things on the other side of the ledger too, like staying up all night if you feel like it—"

"And like going to bed with someone else if you feel like it?"

"Ruthie. Please. We're not going to start that again. I know that getting back to normal is the most important thing in your life. And who knows, maybe you're a helluva lot wiser

and more mature than I am. We're not going to argue that now. All I want to say is this, and I guess I've said it already: You didn't see Ethelyn yesterday afternoon. I have to get that image out of my mind. We spent quite different afternoons yesterday, and it's understandable, I think, that we have different attitudes about the importance of seeing her before we leave. It's one thing, after all, to have spent the afternoon riding in an ambulance and wandering around that god-damned hospital. It's quite another thing to have spent the afternoon Christmas shopping. Can't you see the difference?"

"So you think I spent the afternoon Christmas shopping?"

"I don't know. It was only a guess. It just seemed like the kind of thing you might have been doing yesterday afternoon."

"That's just what I thought you thought! I'm incapable of rising to any greater heights than doing my Christmas shopping."

"I didn't say that, for God's sake! For all I know, you may have spent the afternoon in the Shedd Aquarium."

"Well, it so happens I didn't spend the afternoon in the Shedd Aquarium. Or in the Field Museum or Art Institute either!"

"O.K. So where did you spend your afternoon? Since it seems so important that we be exact about these things."

"I spent yesterday afternoon with Jerry Gates," I said, and I smiled.

And now I will try very hard to remember exactly what we said to each other after that. For hours, it seemed, Roy sat on the arm of a chair, and I sat on the edge of the bed, and we spoke to each other in cold voices, with fluent and logical words. Neither of us smoked; there were no tears; the only feeling I can remember clearly was a strange combination of wild excitement (almost delight!) and gasping-cold horror.

"I spent yesterday afternoon with Jerry Gates," I said.

And Roy said, "You did like hell!"

"Call him up and find out, if you don't believe me. I can

give you his telephone number, and I believe he's still at the office. He can confirm it—and what we did. Which I think you can guess."

He looked at me for a long time in silence. At last he said in a low and quiet voice, "You goddamned little fool. That's the dirtiest thing I've ever heard."

"Don't you swear at me! Dirty! I suppose only *you* are capable of clean, pure, sublime love feelings."

"Love! Wow! That's a good one!"

"Roy, let's stop right now before this gets nasty. I shouldn't have told you that. He warned me not to tell you. But on the other hand, how can we make a new start if we're not completely honest with each other? You must know about this side of me too. I mean, that I'm quite capable of doing something besides going Christmas shopping. You're always so smug and patronizing. You think you know so much about me: just a goodhearted, conscientious, naïve woman who can't experience or comprehend or appreciate anything that doesn't involve cooking or sewing or children or laundry or an occasional concert or meeting or party—"

"Just a minute! While we're being so *honest*, always so honest, let's look at the whole picture for a change. Let's look at the jealous, spiteful, petty, spoiled child who masquerades as a goodhearted, conscientious, naïve and very much put-upon *woman*. You're no woman. You were more of a woman when you were twenty-one years old than you are now. I don't know what you are now. I don't know you. I wish you'd accepted cash for that transaction. It would have shocked me less."

"Are you calling me a whore, Roy?"

"No."

We were silent for a long time after that, looking straight into each other's eyes until it seemed we must both faint with dizziness. At last I said, "Would you mind telling me, giving concrete examples, please, of what you mean by jealous, spite-

ful, petty, spoiled? And what you mean by dishonesty too? Since I assume you are also accusing me of being dishonest."

"Yes, I'm accusing you of being dishonest. Your idea of honesty is to drag everything out in the open. The confessional. But not for the sake of any kind of understanding. Forgiveness—your kind of forgiveness makes me laugh. 'Let's be honest, get everything out in the open.' And what for? So you can have more ammunition for your jealous, spiteful rages. So you can have more material to construct the lovely picture you love to construct of yourself: the goodhearted, conscientious, *mature*, long-suffering woman married to an immature, exasperating, selfish but sometimes lovable little boy. You know what honesty is? Real honesty? Did you hear Clarence this afternoon? When he said that it was hard but sometimes necessary to look yourself straight in the eye? That's honesty! And nothing more. And I daresay that never in your life have you looked yourself straight in the eye. Or if you have, you've been so frightened that you've quickly looked away before anything but the most superficial faults and shortcomings were revealed to you. Have you ever taken a good look at the selfish, spoiled child who, come hell or high water, has to have her own way? In everything! Every goddamned thing!"

"Oh, my! And now I suppose we go back and discuss once more how I ruined your life by insisting that you take a job with the L. T. Chandler Company."

"If you care to discuss it, we can discuss it. Since you brought up the subject, not I, perhaps you have something you'd like to add to our former discussions."

"Yes! I certainly have! Has it ever occurred to you, my fine friend, that you are a man, a free man—nobody's slave? Did you ever say, come right out and say, 'No, I'm sorry, I won't work for Chandler's. I'll wait for the job I really want.' No, you never said that—not once!"

"Good God! I didn't know there was some magic phrase I

had to know. Open Sesame. In the future, you must tell me if I need a secret password."

"All right. Be sarcastic and miss the point. And the point is just this: You had your doubts, too, about that by-now-so-fabulous job in Washington. You're not the wild, free adventurer you think you are. You like your comforts, too, your clean shirts and your pancakes for breakfast and, yes, also your little ranch house in the subdivision! It's just very very convenient for you that I like them also. That way, you can eat your cake and have it too. You can keep your precious notions about yourself and how you'd really live if only your selfish, spoiled wife would allow you to. But let me say to you: Just don't be too sure what kind of person you really are or what kind of life you'd really live without me to—what?—twist your arm, I suppose you'd say. For some reason, it's always been terribly important to you to keep this image of yourself intact—the free man who makes no compromises with society. Well, let me repeat, it's just very handy for you to have me to blame for all your compromises. Including the very first one you ever made in my name."

"My God! I suppose we go back to our school days now."

"Why not? The behaviour was certainly the same. The night your dear fraternity brothers turned the hose in Mrs. Landecker's window. It was only fear of incurring my displeasure that kept you from joining them. It couldn't possibly be that you had enough manners, courtesy, respect for authority to keep you from joining such a group on your own."

"Respect for authority? What the hell are you talking about, anyhow?"

"A house mother in a sorority house is authority, whether you like it or not. But that's not my point. You were so ashamed of your own good behaviour that you had to tell all the boys I would have given you back your pin if you'd joined in their little joke. And you knew very well that wasn't true. I was proud that you weren't with that bunch, but it wasn't I who

kept you from it—it was yourself! But you won't even admit it! And then you have to go and do something to spoil everything always—drink too much, or be rude to someone, or take off your shoes, or anything to show that you make no compromises with anyone or anything. In this case, the very next night making Mrs. Landecker think you were a Marxist, for heaven's sake!"

"Ruthie, I don't believe you're really as asinine as you sometimes sound."

"Sure. Go ahead. That's all you can think of to say, because what I've said is true. And let me tell you something else: Don't you talk to me about clean, pure love, because your little affair with Ethelyn was *the same damned thing!*"

"As what?"

"As telling Mrs. Landecker you were a Communist! Nothing more! Nothing more at all! And if we want to talk about dirt, and spite, and all the things you love to talk about, please, let's not leave you out of it. You and *your* little subterranean motives. I'm not so dumb or humble now as to think that I failed you somehow as a wife and that's why you had to look elsewhere for comfort."

"Comfort! Jesus! No, I never lack for comfort with you. I'll say that."

"All right. What word could you choose instead of 'comfort'? Since the proper choice of words is so terribly important to you?"

"Life! A sense of being alive! But you wouldn't know what I'm talking about. As long as things are 'normal' that's all you care about."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because otherwise the whole question would never have come up. You'd know that there are some things that are more important than getting dinner on the table."

"Like what?"

"Like walks together. Like talks. Like good talks, not interrupted by five thousand irrelevant things—"

"Five thousand irrelevant things! You mean three children and the telephone and the doorbell. We can always disconnect the telephone and doorbell, I suppose. And put the children in gunny sacks with stones and throw them in the Mississippi River?"

"No. But a little back of the hand wouldn't hurt once in a while. What the hell, are they the kings? Are they too stupid to fix their own peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches? You might just try sometime disconnecting them too, and seeing—"

"Why *me*? Why always *me*? Don't you have any responsibility in this area? Believe it or not, darling, you are their father!"

"Why *you*? Because I don't seem to have the combination. I've tried. But you seem to have acquired veto power. Like Russia."

"*When* have you tried?"

"Oh, hell, I've tried from the very beginning!"

"Oh, yes! I seem to recall now. This is another old complaint of yours, isn't it? The minute you got home after the war and found you had a son who wasn't quite big enough yet to go out and earn his own food and then cook it, you started trying. Well, let me tell you what that was, dear heart. That was jealousy, pure and simple. You found you had a rival for my attention, and from that moment on you've done nothing but sulk. Just because I'm no longer twenty-one years old and able to live a free and easy life and listen to every one of your words with large adoring eyes. And I'm sick of it! It's quite simple for a woman without children to have long uninterrupted talks with her husband. Or with another man! And I might point out to you, also, that there was something more than talking involved here too. It wasn't just a good long talk you were after—"

"There certainly was something more involved. Sex! Well,

what the hell is sex? It's a little bit more complicated than Kinsey makes it. Or than you seem to think it is. I'll tell you what sex is to me. It's unscheduled, unrationed kisses."

"Kisses! Excuse me, but ha ha ha. When was it ever possible to kiss you without landing in bed at one-thirty in the afternoon?"

'And what's wrong with landing in bed at one-thirty in the afternoon?"

"Plenty. Maybe I don't feel like landing in bed at one-thirty in the afternoon. Maybe I have a cake in the oven, or maybe I'm waiting for the TV man, or the kids are only next door. But none of those things matter, of course."

"That's right. Wait until everything is out of the way. Lights out. Alarm set. Teeth brushed. That's love. Real spontaneous, heartwarming love! And then: 'Darling, I'm just too tired tonight. I washed all the winter woollens today and put them away.' "

"And do you know what you are at a time like that?" I yelled. "You're just another chore! Just another household chore! I have my side of it too!"

"Well, thank you very much. That was a lovely thing to hear."

"Don't mention it. You've said such lovely things to me in the past, you know."

"And I'll say a helluva lot more lovely things to you! Right now!"

But he didn't. Instead, he put his elbows on his knees and rested his forehead in his hands and stared at the carpet and said in a very low voice, "Ruthie, what's happened to you? I don't even know you any more. This makes me sick."

"What makes you sick?"

"What you've done."

"Is it any worse than what you've done?"

"It's not like you. I don't know you."

"You've never known me."



"That's not true. I've always known you. And I've always loved you too."

"*That's* not true. How could you have done so many things?"

"I've told you. None of it had anything to do with you."

"What did it have to do with, then?" When he didn't reply, I added, "Ghosts, I suppose?"

And then he looked up. "Yes!" he said excitedly. "Ghosts. The whole damned thing is full of ghosts. Ethelyn and Phil and all the rest of it, but also you and me. I don't do or say these things to you—not the real you, not the you I married. That's what I've been trying to say. I'm not entirely clear about all of it yet, but at least I know you know what I'm trying to say now." He looked at me with an awful pleading smile.

But I looked away from him. "No," I replied. "I don't have any idea of what you're trying to say. I have a friend who might, though. He liked to think of me as a ghost also. And do you know something? I'm sick of being taken for a ghost. I'm not a ghost. And neither are you and neither is he. And sometime I hope I can find a man somewhere—" my throat was becoming tight with tears, and I stood up—"a good, simple man who is able to love a person just as they are . . . just love a person . . ." I was crying now, and I picked up my blue dress from a chair and put it in my suitcase. "I'm going home," I said. "By myself."

Roy sprang to his feet then and came over and grabbed both my shoulders. "The hell you are!" he yelled. "What you need is a beating! A beating! To get some sense in your damned head!"

"Don't you touch me! Don't you dare touch me!"

"Look at me, then! Look right in my eyes!"

I looked into his eyes: they were furious, distracted, anguished, full of tears. He was breathing very hard and fast, and his forehead was full of perspiration. "I love you, and you know that goddamned good and well! I love you, do you hear me?"

I tried to look away from him, but he wouldn't let me. "Don't you know what love is? Don't you know you can't possess another human being—ever?"

I felt as if I were choking, as if I might faint.

"Answer me! Don't you know you can't possess me? But I love you. Do you hear me? Do you believe me?"

"Yes," I breathed. "Yes, yes, yes! Oh, Roy, let me go, I'm going to be sick."

"No you're not," he replied, and he picked me up and carried me to the bed<sup>48</sup> and lay down by my side and took me in his arms. And we lay there for a long time, clutching each other desperately, like two frightened children.

At last Roy said, his face still buried in my neck, "You're not a ghost, Ruthie. I got it wrong. You may be for him, but not for me. Not now."

"I'm the same. It's only life that's different now. Except maybe not. Maybe *I* am too."

We both sighed then, at the same time, and pulled away from each other and looked at each other and smiled finally—a sad, relieved, embarrassed, triumphant smile.

"I don't think I've ever really loved you before this," I said.

"Let's have a cigarette," Roy replied.

We lay on the bed, smoking, for some time, only our hands touching.

"Sure you've loved me before this," Roy said. "Not in the same way, maybe. But things never stay the same way, I guess. That's death. Only dead things don't change."

"They change too. They rot away and disappear finally."

"Only chairs and tables, then. Inanimate things. Without life."

"I was becoming an inanimate thing, I think. Now I don't feel that way. I'll never feel that way again. I'm sure of it. Because now I know you really love me."

"That doesn't have anything to do with it, Ruthie. If you have a close brush with death, then it's quite enough just to

be alive. It's even better than being drunk. But after a few days you forget about it."

"I'll never forget the feeling. It *was* a close brush with death. I see what you mean very well. But I'll always remember it."

"No you won't. I won't either. Don't say 'never' and 'always.' Both words make me nervous."

I smiled. "You and your words!"

"There's no such thing as living happily ever after. They ought to ban fairy tales. They're much worse than dirty comic books. I want to tell Ethelyn that, too. She needs to know it."

"Roy, why don't you call Clarence now? Maybe he's talked to the doctor."

"It doesn't matter. I can write it to her in a letter. We'll call tomorrow from St. Paul, the way we said we would."

"But we've missed the train. If we can see her this evening, it would be kind of silly to go to a movie or something until train time."

"We can fly home," he said. "Did you ever think of that?"

And so, finally, I finished packing my bag. And we ate our dinner in the Wrigley Building. And went to Union Station to pick up Roy's bag. And drove to Midway Airport through slushy streets, past many neon signs, and taverns, freight yards, buses full of weary faces, brightly lighted supermarkets and used-car lots, small, square ugly houses with ornate lamps in every front window and people moving dimly behind them. And while we waited for our flight to be called we drank some kind of orange drink from a machine and smoked one cigarette together.

"We'll be home in two hours. It seems funny. We can call Mother when we get in, but let's leave the kids there tonight."

"O.K. It's up to you."

"I wonder if Mother got hold of the TV man. I simply will not pay that bill until he fixes things right."

Roy grinned at me.

And then our flight was called.

And as we roared down the runway in that last furious push before the take-off, Roy put his arm around me and whistled in my ear, "Off we go into the wide blue yonder."

I smiled at him; and I was about to say that I felt as if we were taking off into a gorgeous gold-and-red dawn, when quite suddenly I realized I didn't feel that way at all. I only felt glad to have Roy sitting beside me, with his arm around me, to be going home to my children. So I said nothing until we were in the air.

What I said then sounds so stupid now that I'm almost embarrassed to write it down: 'I think I'm going to order a standing rib roast for Christmas dinner this time. Would you have any objections if we didn't have turkey?'

But instead of answering my question, Roy only grinned at me again and reached over and unfastened both our safety belts.